



SOCIOLOGICAL METHODOLOGY: PARADIGMS, TYPES, AND CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT TRENDS

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Abstract: This article examines the theoretical foundations of sociological methodology, its paradigms, major classifications, and contemporary development trends. The study analyzes the concepts of methodology and research methods, highlighting their similarities and differences. Particular attention is given to the evolution of sociological paradigms, including positivist, functionalist, phenomenological, and interpretive approaches. The paper explores general, special, and empirical methodologies as well as explanatory, descriptive, and interpretive methodological traditions. The findings indicate that modern sociology is characterized by methodological pluralism, where different paradigms contribute to understanding diverse dimensions of social reality. The article concludes that the integration of theoretical and empirical approaches remains a key challenge for contemporary sociological research.

Keywords: sociology, methodology, paradigm, sociological research, functionalism, phenomenology, empirical methodology, interpretive sociology, social reality, scientific knowledge.

Introduction

Methodology occupies a central position in sociological research as it provides the theoretical and practical foundations for understanding social reality. Sociological methodology develops through fundamental, applied, empirical, and specialized research and interacts closely with other scientific disciplines. The philosophy of knowledge plays a crucial role in shaping methodological principles and research approaches. The primary task of sociological methodology is to develop principles, forms, and methods for investigating social processes.

The concept of "paradigm," introduced by Thomas Kuhn, significantly influenced the development of sociological methodology. A paradigm represents a conceptual framework that incorporates specific assumptions, principles, approaches, and methods for solving scientific problems. Throughout the history of sociology, methodological development has been marked by the emergence and replacement of various paradigms, each contributing unique perspectives to the study of society.



Theoretical Foundations of Sociological Methodology

Sociological methodology is concerned with establishing the principles and procedures through which social phenomena can be investigated systematically. It seeks to answer fundamental questions regarding the nature of social reality, the relationship between individuals and society, and the methods appropriate for studying social life. The development of sociological methodology has been influenced by several major paradigms:

Positivist Paradigm

The positivist paradigm emphasizes objective observation, measurement, and the discovery of social laws. It applies scientific methods similar to those used in the natural sciences and seeks causal explanations for social phenomena.

Functionalist Paradigm

Functionalism attempts to integrate various social relationships into a coherent analytical framework. It focuses on the functions performed by social institutions and structures within society. Functionalist methodology is based on the concepts of universal and specific functions and aims to explain how different social elements contribute to social stability and order.

Phenomenological Paradigm

Phenomenology differs fundamentally from positivist approaches. It focuses on understanding the subjective meanings individuals attach to their actions and experiences. Rather than emphasizing objective structures, phenomenological sociology investigates how individuals interpret and construct social reality.

Interpretive Paradigm

The interpretive tradition, represented by scholars such as Max Weber and Georg Simmel, emphasizes understanding social action through the meanings individuals assign to their behavior. According to this perspective, sociology should focus on interpreting human actions rather than merely explaining observable facts.

Types of Sociological Methodology

Sociological methodology can be classified according to different criteria. One of the most common classifications distinguishes between general, special, and empirical methodologies.

General Methodology

General methodology emerges from fundamental research concerning social reality, human existence, and culture. It develops universal principles of knowledge and addresses broad methodological issues related to theoretical and empirical understanding.

Historically, naturalism, psychologism, functionalism, structuralism, and realism have all attempted to serve as general methodological frameworks. In contemporary American sociology, functionalism continues to occupy an influential position and is often associated with academic sociology.



Special Methodology

Special methodology is designed for the investigation of specific social phenomena and research areas. It develops methodological tools suitable for studying particular aspects of society, including public opinion, labor relations, social groups, and social structures.

Examples of special methodological approaches include:

- Role theory;
- Status analysis;
- Axiological (value-based) approaches;
- Sociometry.

Sociometry, developed by Jacob Moreno, became an important methodological tool for studying interpersonal relationships and group dynamics.

Empirical Methodology

Empirical methodology focuses on the collection, analysis, and interpretation of social data. During the twentieth century, scholars such as Stuart Dodd, George Lundberg, and Paul Lazarsfeld made significant contributions to the methodological foundations of empirical sociology.

Lazarsfeld argued that methodology should not be understood merely as a collection of research techniques. Instead, it should critically evaluate research methods and clarify the meanings of concepts and theories. His work contributed to the development of key methodological procedures such as:

- Conceptual interpretation;
- Operationalization;
- Measurement;
- Data analysis.

These procedures remain fundamental components of modern empirical research.

Major Methodological Traditions in Sociology

Explanatory Methodology

Explanatory methodology seeks to identify stable relationships and causal connections that determine social phenomena. It aims to discover general laws governing social behavior and social processes.


This approach is associated with:

- Positivism;
- Structural functionalism;
- Systems theory;
- Scientific objectivism.

Explanatory sociology emphasizes causality, structure, and functional relationships within society.

Systems Theory and Functional Analysis

During the mid-twentieth century, systems theory became increasingly influential in sociology. Talcott Parsons developed a systematic theory of social action, arguing that social



order results from institutionalized patterns of interaction. According to Parsons, society functions as an integrated system maintained through mechanisms of social integration.

Robert K. Merton further refined functional analysis by introducing the concepts of dysfunction and functional alternatives. His contributions enabled a more nuanced understanding of social structures and their consequences.

Descriptive Methodology

Descriptive methodology is based on the systematic observation and classification of empirical facts. It emphasizes accurate data collection, measurement, comparison, and categorization.

The primary methods of descriptive sociology include:

- Classification;
- Grouping;
- Comparison;
- Typology;
- Systematization.

Herbert Spencer's work played an important role in the development of descriptive sociology. During the first half of the twentieth century, descriptive methodology became one of the dominant approaches in sociological research.

Interpretive Methodology

Interpretive sociology emerged as an alternative to positivist and naturalistic approaches. It argues that social reality cannot be fully understood through objective observation alone because human beings are conscious actors who assign meanings to their actions.

Max Weber maintained that sociology should focus on understanding meaningful social action. The central task of sociological inquiry is therefore to uncover individuals' motivations, intentions, and subjective interpretations.


Interpretive methodology places human experience and individuality at the center of sociological analysis. It remains highly influential in contemporary qualitative research.

Contemporary Challenges and Development Trends

Modern sociology is characterized by methodological diversity rather than methodological unity. No single paradigm can adequately explain all dimensions of social reality. Consequently, contemporary sociologists increasingly recognize the value of methodological pluralism.

Several important trends can be identified:

1. Development of a multiparadigmatic framework for sociological knowledge.
2. Greater attention to cultural, spiritual, and subjective dimensions of social life.
3. Efforts to establish common scientific criteria across different sociological traditions.
4. Integration of empirical research with theoretical innovation.
5. Expansion of methodological tools capable of investigating hidden and complex social processes.



One of the most significant contemporary debates concerns the relationship between objectivity and subjectivity. While traditional explanatory and descriptive approaches emphasized objective social structures, modern sociology increasingly acknowledges the importance of human agency, culture, and subjective experience.

The transformation of modern societies, particularly under conditions of globalization and market-oriented reforms, requires more sophisticated methodological approaches capable of addressing emerging social realities.

Conclusion: Sociological methodology has undergone significant development through the emergence of diverse paradigms and research traditions. Functionalist, phenomenological, explanatory, descriptive, and interpretive approaches have each contributed valuable insights into the understanding of social reality. Contemporary sociology recognizes that no single methodology can provide a complete explanation of society. Instead, methodological pluralism has become an essential characteristic of sociological inquiry.

The future development of sociological methodology depends on the integration of theoretical and empirical research, the refinement of scientific criteria, and the continued exploration of subjective and cultural dimensions of social life. Such developments will enhance sociology's ability to analyze complex social transformations and provide meaningful solutions to contemporary social challenges.

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