

PARADIGMS, THEORY AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Workshop 3

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1. Introduction

This chapter explains some specific ways theory and research work together in the field of inquiry of social life. Author starts with describing some social science paradigms, which underline social theories and inquiry. Then he continues with elements of social theory and after that he is explaining the traditional model of science, deductive and also inductive theory construction.

In the chapter there are a lot of examples or a case illustrations and I more or less left out all of this, because otherwise this summary would be too long. The examples are really helpful, so it is good to read them to understand the topics discussed in this workshop.

Theories usually seek to provide logical explanations. And theories function in three ways in research; firstly, they prevent our being taken by flukes, which means that if we know why it has happened, we can anticipate whether or not it will work in future. Second, theories make sense of observed patterns in a way that can suggest other possibilities. And thirdly, theories shape and direct research efforts, pointing toward likely discoveries through empirical observation.

2. Some social science paradigms

Paradigms are the fundamental models or frames of reference we use to organize our observations and reasoning. Paradigms are often difficult to recognize as such because they are so implicit, assumed, taken for granted. They seem more like “the way that things are” than like one possible point of view among many.

But when we recognize that we are operating within a paradigm, two benefits accrue. First, we are better able to understand the seemingly bizarre view and actions of others who are the operating from a different paradigm. And second, at times we can profit from stepping outside our paradigm and we are suddenly able to see new ways of seeing and explaining things. We cannot do that as long we mistake our paradigms for reality.

Social scientists have developed several paradigms for understanding social behaviour. In the social sciences theoretical paradigms may gain or lose popularity, but they are seldom discarded altogether. The paradigms of the social sciences offer a variety of views, each of which offers insights the others lack while ignoring aspects of social life that the others reveal. Ultimately, the paradigms are not true or false: as ways of looking, they are only more or less useful. Each of the paradigms described in this chapter offers a different way of looking at human social life. Each of them makes certain assumptions about the nature or social reality. Each of them can open up new understandings, suggest different kinds of theories and inspire different kinds of research.

2.1. Macrotheory and Microtheory

Macrotheory means that some theorists focus their attention on society at large or at least on large portions of it. Topics of study usually include the struggle between economic classes in society, international relations or the interrelations among major institutions in society, such as government, religion and family. So, in short, macrotheory deals with large, aggregate entities of society or even whole societies.

On the other hand, *microtheory* deals with issues of social life at the level of individuals and small groups. Dating behaviour, jury deliberations and student-faculty interactions are apt subjects for a microtheoretical perspective.

2.2. *Early Positivism*

In this paradigm we focused primarily on Auguste Comte and his work. Comte identified society as a phenomenon which can be studied scientifically. Before Comte everything was simple, connected with religion only, but Comte separated his inquiry from religion. He felt that religious belief could be replaced with scientific study and objectivity. He felt like he is launching a new phase of history, in which science would replace religion and metaphysics by basic knowledge on observations through the five senses rather than on belief of logic alone. Comte felt that society could be observed and then explained logically and rationally. His view that that society could be studied scientifically came to form the foundation for subsequent development of the social sciences. He coined the term *positivism* to describe this scientific approach.

2.3. *Social Darwinism*

Charles Darwin's theory states that as a species coped with its environment, those individuals most suited to success would be the most likely to survive long enough to reproduce. Over the time the traits of the survivor would come to dominate the species.

When scholars began to study society analytically, they applied Darwin's ideas to changes in structure of human affairs. Among many others, Herbert Spencer concluded that society was getting better and better. He believed that this principle ("the survival of the fittest") was a primary force shaping the nature of society.

2.4. *Conflict Paradigm*

Karl Marx suggested that social behaviour could best be seen as the process of conflict; the attempt to dominate others and to avoid being dominated. Marx focused primarily on the struggle among economic classes. Specifically, he examined

the way that capitalism produced the oppression of workers by the owners of industry. The *conflict paradigm* proved to be fruitful also outside the realm of purely economic analyses. Georg Simmel was especially interested in small-scale conflict, in contrast to Marx's class struggle.

Whereas the *conflict paradigm* often focuses on class, gender or ethnic struggles, it would be appropriate to apply it whenever different groups have competing interests.

2.5. *Symbolic Interactionism*

Simmel was more interested in how individuals interacted with one another. In other words, his thinking and research took a "micro" turn, thus calling attention to aspects of social reality that are invisible in Marx's or Spencer's theory. Simmel's focus in the nature of interactions influenced G.H. Mead and C.H. Cooley and many others. For example, Cooley introduced the idea of the "primary group" those intimate associates with whom we share a sense of belonging, such as our family, friends and so on. Mead, for example, emphasized the importance of our human ability to "take the role of the other", imagining how others feel and how they might behave in certain circumstances.

This paradigm can lend insights into the nature of interactions in ordinary social life, but it can also help us understand unusual forms of interaction.

2.6. *Ethnomethodology*

Harold Garfinkel claims that people are continually creating social structure through their actions and interactions; that they are in fact creating their reality. Garfinkel suggests that people are continuously trying to make sense of life they experience. In a sense, he suggests that everyone is acting like a social scientist that is why he uses term *ethnomethodology* or "methodology of people"

2.7. Structural Functionalism

Structural functionalism, sometimes also known as "social systems theory" grows out of a notion introduced by Comte and Spencer. A social entity, such as an

organisation or a whole society, can be viewed as an organism. Like other organisms, a social system is made up of parts, each of which contributes to the functioning the whole. The view of society as a social system looks for the "functions" served by its various components.

2.8. Feminist Paradigms

Researchers looking at the social world from a feminist paradigm have called attention to aspects of social life that are not revealed by other paradigms. Feminist theory and research have focused on gender differences and how they relate to the rest of social organization. These lines of inquiry have drawn attention to the oppression of woman in many societies, which in turn has shed light on oppression generally.

2.9 Rational Objectivity Reconsidered

As fundamentally as rationality is to most of us, however, some contemporary scholars have raised questions about it. First of all, positivistic social scientists have sometimes erred that social reality can be explained in rational terms because humans always act rationally. A more sophisticated positivism would assert that we can rationally understand and predict even nonrational behaviour ("Asch experiment").

The criticism of positivism challenges the idea that scientist can be as objective as the positivistic ideal assumes. Most scientist would agree that personal feelings can and do influence the problems scientists choose to study, what they choose to observe, and the conclusions they draw from their observations.

There is even more radical critique of the ideal of objectivity. To begin with, all our experiences are inescapably subjective. We can see only through our own eyes and we can hear things only the way our particular ears and brain transmit and interpret sound waves. Despite the inescapable subjectivity of our experience, we humans seem to be wired to seek an agreement on what is really real, what is objectively so. Objectivity is a conceptual attempt to get beyond our individual views.

We will never be able to distinguish completely between an objective reality and our subjective experience.

3. *Elements of social theory*

Paradigms are general framework or viewpoints. They provide ways of looking at life and are grounded in sets of assumptions about the nature of reality. Theories are systematic sets of interrelated statements intended to explain some aspects of social life. So, theories are the one to specify paradigms. Whereas a paradigm offers a way of looking, a theory aims at explaining what we see.

In social research, **observation** typically refers to seeing, hearing and sometimes touching. A correspond idea is **fact**. Scientists try to organize many facts under "rules" called **laws**. Kaplan defines laws as universal generalizations about classes of facts. Laws must be truly universal, not merely accidental patterns found among a specific set of facts. Laws should not be mistaken for theories. Whereas a law is an observed regularity, a **theory** is a systematic explanation for observations that relate to a particular aspect of life. Theories explain observations by means of concepts. **Concepts** are abstract elements representing classes of phenomena within the field of study. A **variable** is a special kind of concept. Each variable comprises a set of attributes. **Axioms or postulates** are fundamental assertions, taken to be true, on which a theory is grounded. From axioms we might proceed to **propositions** that are specific conclusions about the relationships among concepts that are derived from the axiomatic groundwork. From proportions we can derive **hypotheses**. A hypothesis is a specified testable expectation about empirical reality that follows from a more general proposition. Research is design to test hypotheses.

4. *The traditional model of science*

There are three main elements in the traditional model of science: **theory, operationalization and observation**. According to the traditional model, scientists begin with a thing from which they derive testable hypotheses. To test any hypotheses first scientists must specify the meanings of all the variables involved in it in observational turns. Once they specify the variables, they need to specify how to measure them. Operationalization literally means specifying the exact operations involved in measuring the variable. For the researcher testing a hypothesis the meaning of variables is exactly and only what the operational definition specifies.

After developing theoretical clarity and specific expectations and creating a strategy for looking all that remains is to look at the way things actually are-observation. An essential quality in any hypothesis is **disconfirmability** that is the possibility that observations may not support our expectations.

5. Deductive theory construction

The first step in deductive theory construction is to pick a topic that interests you. The next step is to specify the range of phenomena your theory addresses and then to identify and specify your major concept and variables. The fourth step is to find out what is known (propositions) about the relationship among those variables you specified. And the last step is to reason logically from those propositions to the specific topic you are examining.

The example in the book (Guillermina Jasso's theory of distributive justice) illustrates how reasoning can lead to a variety of theoretical expectations that can be tested by observation.

6. Inductive theory construction

Inductive method means that first you observe aspects of social life and then seek to discover patterns that may point to relatively universal principles. B. Glasser and A. Strauss coined the term *grounded theory* in reference to this method.

Field research (the direct observation of events in progress) is frequently used to develop theories through observation.

Again the example in the book (David Takeuchi's study of factors influencing marijuana smoking) illustrates how collecting observations can lead to generalizations and an explanatory theory.

7. The links between theory and research

there are many variations for linking theory and research. Sometimes theoretical issues are introduced merely as a background for empirical analyses.

Some other studies cite selected empirical data to bolster theoretical arguments. Some studies make no use of theory at all.

So to conclude there is no simple recipe for conducting social research. It is far more open-ended than the traditional view of science suggests. At the end, science depends on two categories of activity: logic and observation.

8. Bibliography

Babbie, Earl. 2001. *The Practice of Social Research*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company; Chapter 2: "Paradigms, Theory and Social Research", 41-67.