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A Brief Comparative Analysis of Positivism and Subjectivism as Philosophical Approaches to Research

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Abstract

The discussion in this paper is meant to simplify two philosophical foundations of research to the understanding of both Undergraduate and Graduate Students. Thus, positivism and subjectivism as paradigms of research forms the basis of this discussion in this paper. The paper proceeds to discuss, in a comparative sense, where one philosophical paradigm may be usable and instances where they may not be. The author also points out that the academic discourses that focus on the argument that one paradigm opposes the other must be reconsidered. The author argues from the position that indeed, these paradigms are rather complementary and may in some cases, be used together to collect data from the field. The paper further looks at criticisms raised against each paradigm.

Keywords: *Philosophical, Subjectivism, Positivism, Africa, Social, Research*

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1. Introduction

Philosophical foundations of research have had their fair share in academic discourses with the focus highlighting their relevance and applicability in respective research works; emphasizing the merits and demerits of these philosophical approaches to scientific research (Fuza, 2017). Be as it may, one may argue that such debate should not be subject for discussion since each philosophical approach is conducive for specific type of research and not the other or all others. Thus, as Fuza (2017) points out, a researcher may not necessarily have the luxury of determining which philosophical route to explore at his will but the nature of the study will unavoidably determine what a researcher must adopt.

However, these debates have unavoidably been waging on scholarship for many decades and they do not appear to cease. It may be important to keep the discourse going as a way of allowing the debates to compel philosophical foundations to purge themselves and ratify themselves to suit changing norms in research in particular and in scholarship as a whole. While so doing, we hope not to lose sight of the new pointers towards context specificity especially when it comes to social research in many societies in Africa. Context specificity and context relevance means that ontology must be African and the epistemology must also be African in nature. Whereas a particular philosophical foundation may be the cast-in-stone requirement for a particular study, societal dynamics may render it obsolete and prefer another philosophical foundation which will adequately address data gathering challenges and provide accurate data for the study. In sum, flexibility in the report to, or application of philosophical foundations of social research should form the current focus of the discourse.

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2. Positivists and Subjectivist Discourse

Hiller (2016), one of the scholars who has explored this subject in some detail, argues that positivism is a branch of the objectivist approach to scientific research. Hiller further observes that positivism “is a philosophical system of knowledge that accepts only observable or measurable or empirical experiences of the world as data for analysis and that the findings of such research are deemed as positive or absolute truths about reality. Researchers therefore treat subjects they study as objects to be analyzed. Hiller (2016) further argues that Positivism is the perspective held in the natural sciences that has its focus on explanation of cause-effect relationship between inanimate objects and or natural phenomena.

It is important to point out that Positivist research may contain some aspects of realism as Al Habil (2014) argues. As it has been described by scholars, they are value -neutral or value- free (Hiller, 2016). With positivism, often the predictions have major elements of precision and certainty. The Positivists according to Hiller (2016) argue that the process of objectively and systematically observing, describing and analyzing specific aspects of reality leads to facts (the way things are) that are value free or value neutral (Hiller, 2016). That means research processes and results are not influenced by the opinions, perspectives and biases of the researcher.. The positivists subscribe to the notion that factual knowledge, that is, knowledge which is acquired from facts or knowledge that is based on facts and acquired through observation (the human senses) such as the use of measurement (Atta-Asiedu, 2020) is more trustworthy. In effect, quantitative methods of research are more reliable than any other methods.

It is further argued that in positivism studies, the role of the researcher is limited to data collection and objective analysis and interpretation of the data collected (Hiller, 2016). This research is done through methods such as hypothesis formulation and the deductions that are made afterwards. Again, Positivists believe that science is the only way to learn about the world and to establish what is deemed as truth. That beyond science, reality cannot be interpreted in any other way. In this context, the research findings are described as ‘observable’ and ‘quantifiable’ (Levers, 2013). Thus, statistical analysis can be produced as a result. This is commonly used in quantitative research rather than qualitative research.

In a nutshell, positivism as a philosophical foundation of scientific research believes that knowledge must be based on human experience and not what has not been experienced. It does not subscribe to the abstract and the metaphysical. In this approach, the researcher is independent and detached from the study and gives no room to personal interests. Thus, phenomenology and participatory observations are not methodologies used by positivists. It is in this light that Gewirth (1954) posits that Positivists concentrate on nothing but facts.

The concept of Subjectivism as a philosophy of science in research on the other hand appears to oppose the positivist paradigms. Whereas some authors have posited that subjectivism stands in opposition to positivism (Levers, 2013), other scholars such as Diesing (2019) argue that subjectivism does not necessarily stand in opposition to positivism but instead stands in complimentary. The subjectivists take their roots from the relativist ontology while adopting a subjectivist epistemology in their research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Subjectivism may be described as a form of scientific knowledge that filters on the argument that knowledge is posited through the lenses of variables such as ethnicity, class, race, language and other social and cultural paradigms.

The position touted by subjectivists that knowledge is not cast-in-stone and only scientifically defined and cuts across board, but that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed, appears to be a formidable argument put across by subjectivists. According to Klein and Hirschheim (1987) the subjectivist position that perceives the world and its knowledge as a “social construction of reality” sounds convincing. Indeed, subjectivists do not deny the existence of an external reality but epistemology built on subjectivism recognized knowledge, not as value-neutral or value-free but value-laden. As Levers (2013) argues, universal knowledge of an external reality cannot exist beyond personal observations and constructions. I’m so, perceptions are largely influenced by the researcher and the researcher can be influenced by the subject or object (Levers, 2013).

Many social researchers who adopt phenomenology or participatory observation in their field research make strong arguments for subjectivism. In essence, both Denzil and Lincoln (2005) and Levers (2013) are of the position that contemporary social research seems to be shifting gradually away from Positivists and post-positivist paradigms to the interpretivists models (Levers, 2013). The subjectivist approach to social research has been hailed by some scholars for its recognition of the dynamics of human societies and the need to conduct relevant research in a position that does not compel a researcher to detach themselves from the society or the people being studied. As Klein and Hirschheim (1987) point out, knowledge of the subject or object under study can be improved by the perceptions, opinions and even the biases of the participants directly involved in the phenomena. The authors also argue that there cannot be a cultural reality except through ‘cultural sharing’.

The subjectivist approach in a nutshell can be summed up in this quote that the subjectivist approach to inquiry denies the appropriateness of the causal relationship model for the understanding of phenomena which are mediated through human action. It holds that the data modeler must depend on his socially pre conditioned pre understanding of the subject-matter. (Klein and Hirschheim, 1987).

3. Criticisms to Positivism and Subjectivism

Critics warn that a positivistic approach assumes the position that the researcher is independent of the study and that the researcher is independently objective. Being independent of the research means that the positivist researcher maintains no or very minimal interaction with the participants or subject(s) being studied during the research. This sense of detachment of the researcher from the study as we have in say, phenomenology, has been critiqued by some researchers who dwell on the many advantages a researcher accrues on the field and the degree of results that immersion in the study brings (Al Habil, 2014). When it is argued that common sense, which every researcher indeed has, must not bear on a research, then what may be produced will lose a human touch. It is accepted if the study is on non-human subjects but if it is on human subjects and in the field of social research then the detachment of the researcher from the subject being studied will only produce rigid and cast-in-stone results. This approach may not be feasible in practical terms (Fournier, 2003). Basing ontology on a single reality may not be the best way to study human societies as we have in social research. In essence, where the epistemology is strictly scientific and the axiology is value-free, the research, per proponents of subjectivism, may lose its credibility in some years to come as societal and human dynamics set in. The tendency of adopting existing theory to develop hypotheses and subsequently the methodologies to be used may help in cases of replicability but may not give room for flexibility and the tendency to explore concealed facts and truths. Positivists must understand that in research, especially in the social sciences and humanities, several factors other than science may combine to produce accurate findings (Sack, 1980).

Subjectivism on the other hand has been criticized mainly by the seeming laissez faire approach to data gathering where the concept of value-ladenness if not checked can allow personal biases to overwhelm data collected, according to Mannan (2016). This, it is believed, can also affect the authenticity of data gathered and questioned as to the scientific accuracy of data collected from the field (Mannan, 2016). Scholars who subscribe to the positivist paradigm hold a strong exception to this philosophical concept and question in the streams of accuracy, reliability and replicability.

To conclude, the philosophical paradigm of subjectivism has had its gains while the philosophical paradigm of positivism has had its gains as well, in various relevant forms of social research. Whereas subjectivism works for certain research criteria, so does positivism and post-positivism paradigms. A coherent amalgamation of both philosophical paradigms in a complementary rather than opposing fashion will enhance social research globally (Diesing, 2019).

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