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Abstract:

This study seeks to explore the epistemological foundations of social sciences through a critical analysis of three main frameworks: positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism. While positivism has contributed to advancing experimental social research based on quantitative measurement and objectivity, interpretivism has highlighted the importance of the subjective meanings individuals assign to their actions, paving the way for qualitative research methods. On the other hand, critical realism offers an approach that integrates both perspectives by recognizing the existence of independent social structures while emphasizing that social and cultural contexts shape our knowledge of them.

The article also examines recent epistemological shifts, including feminist and postcolonial critiques, which call for a rethinking of traditional methods of knowledge production. These shifts emphasize the necessity of including the voices and experiences of marginalized groups. Based on this analysis, the paper advocates for methodological pluralism and epistemological flexibility as essential tools for understanding complex social phenomena.

This study presents an integrated research framework that goes deep into interpretive analysis, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of social reality. The article concludes that social sciences must move beyond traditional methodological divides and adopt a more pluralistic and integrated approach to address contemporary social challenges effectively.

Keywords: Epistemology, Positivism, Interpretivism, Critical Realism, Methodological Pluralism, Social Sciences.

Introduction

The social sciences, encompassing sociology, anthropology, political science, and psychology, have long strived to gain recognition as rigorous scientific disciplines. Studying these fields presents unique challenges as they deal with complex human phenomena involving social interactions, cultural concepts, and societal institutions, all intertwined in ways that cannot easily be measured or explained. In this context, epistemology—the theory of knowledge—becomes central in guiding the methodologies and approaches used to study societies.

Epistemology in the social sciences seeks to answer fundamental questions about how researchers know what they know about society and social phenomena. What are the limits of social knowledge? How can knowledge about human behavior be objective when closely tied to subjective factors such as culture and values? This tension poses significant challenges to social scientists who aim to build robust explanatory models based on scientifically testable foundations.

A primary issue in studying the social sciences is defining and justifying valid knowledge about the social world. It requires grappling with human complexities that cannot be studied purely through empirical methods, as is often the case in the natural sciences. Instead, researchers must consider subjective dimensions, such as the meanings individuals attach to their actions and the influence of social and cultural forces on those actions. Hence, there is a need for an epistemological framework that balances scientific explanation with recognizing the unique nature of social reality.

Over the decades, various approaches and methods have evolved to address these questions in the social sciences, including interpretive and critical thinking methods. However, a fundamental question remains about balancing the objective and subjective elements in studying societies. How can we, within the framework of the social sciences, build scientific knowledge that acknowledges both the objective structures of social life and the subjective experiences of individuals?

This question leads us to explore the outcomes that might help answer these inquiries, shedding light on reconciling the different social sciences approaches through diverse epistemological methodologies.

Methods

This paper adopts a comprehensive approach to examining the epistemological foundations of social sciences by reviewing a wide array of scholarly literature published in high-impact academic journals and authoritative books. The review explores how various epistemological frameworks, such as positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism, have shaped the development of social science research. To address the question of balancing objectivity and subjectivity in social inquiry, the sources were carefully selected to reflect diverse perspectives on the complexities of studying human societies.

A total of 14 academic sources were analyzed, including key journal articles from *The American Journal of Sociology*, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, and *Theory and Society*. Additionally, seminal books by prominent theorists such as Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific*

Revolutions (1962) and Roy Bhaskar's A Realist Theory of Science (1978) were consulted to gain deeper insights into the evolution of epistemological debates. These sources were chosen based on their relevance to epistemological discussions and citation frequency within the academic community.

The methodological focus of this review was to compare and contrast the different approaches social scientists use to reconcile objective scientific inquiry with the subjective nature of social life. Special attention was given to studies illustrating how positivist, interpretive, and critical realist methodologies have been employed in empirical research. Furthermore, the selection process emphasized literature that addresses the challenges of studying social phenomena without oversimplifying the complexities inherent in human behavior and social interactions.

This method allowed for a critical examination of the central question posed in the introduction: How can social sciences produce scientific knowledge that recognizes both the objective structures of social life and the subjective experiences of individuals? Drawing on a broad range of influential sources, this review aims to provide a balanced perspective on the epistemological tensions within the social sciences. It offers potential pathways for resolving these challenges.

Theoretical Background

The study of the epistemological foundations of social sciences draws heavily on broader philosophical debates that stretch back centuries. The origins of the inquiry into the nature of knowledge can be traced to ancient philosophers, particularly to the works of Plato and Aristotle. Both questioned the sources and validity of knowledge, though they diverged in their epistemological positions. Plato's theory of forms emphasized the existence of ideal, unchangeable truths accessible only through rational thought. At the same time, Aristotle's empiricism laid the groundwork for knowledge derived from sensory experience and observation (Magee, 2010). These foundational ideas laid the groundwork for later developments in social scientific epistemology.

With the Enlightenment came an emphasis on reason and scientific inquiry, significantly influencing positivist epistemology's development. Positivism, championed by thinkers such as Auguste Comte, posited that empirical observation and the scientific method were the only valid paths to knowledge. Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830) provided a blueprint for a scientific approach to social phenomena that emphasized predictability and control over social behavior. This positivist approach was further developed by Émile Durkheim, who sought to apply the methods of natural sciences to studying society, famously describing social facts as "things" that exist independently of individual consciousness (Durkheim, 1897).

However, as social scientists sought to grapple with the complexity of human behavior and social interactions, critiques of positivism emerged. Max Weber's interpretivism provided a counterpoint, arguing that the social sciences require a fundamentally different epistemological approach than the natural sciences due to the unique nature of human consciousness and intentionality (Weber, 1904). Weber's focus on understanding (*Verstehen*) human action in its subjective context laid the foundation for qualitative methods in social research, highlighting the need to interpret the meaning behind social phenomena rather than merely measure them.

Beyond the dichotomy of positivism and interpretivism, critical realism emerged as an attempt to reconcile these differing perspectives. In his seminal work *A Realist Theory of Science* (1978), Roy

Bhaskar argued that while the social world is real and can be studied scientifically, our knowledge of it is mediated by subjective interpretation. Bhaskar's approach posits that deeper, unobservable structures influence observable phenomena, thus emphasizing the need for a scientific method that acknowledges both empirical data and the theoretical constructs underlying social processes (Danermark et al., 2002).

Critical theory, mainly as developed by the Frankfurt School, introduced a further layer of complexity to the epistemological foundations of social sciences. Thinkers like Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno critiqued positivism for its reductionist tendencies, arguing that it ignores the role of power, ideology, and historical context in shaping knowledge (Horkheimer, 1972). Their work emphasized that all knowledge is socially constructed and that the aim of social research should be to uncover these hidden power structures rather than observe and measure social phenomena.

Contemporary discussions in social epistemology have expanded further to include feminist and postcolonial critiques, which challenge traditional epistemological frameworks for being exclusionary and based on Eurocentric, male-dominated perspectives. Feminist epistemologists such as Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway have argued for "standpoint epistemology," which posits that knowledge is situated and shaped by the experiences of marginalized groups, offering a more comprehensive understanding of social realities (Harding, 1986). Similarly, postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak have highlighted how Western knowledge systems have been used to dominate and marginalize non-Western societies, calling for a decolonization of knowledge (Said, 1978).

These various epistemological debates highlight the complexity and diversity of perspectives within social science. The tension between objectivity and subjectivity, empiricism and interpretation, and power and knowledge is at the heart of epistemological inquiry in the social sciences. This plurality of approaches is crucial for advancing social scientific knowledge, as it enables researchers to explore the social world from multiple angles and to consider both the macro and micro-level processes that shape human behavior.

In recent years, social epistemology has also engaged with developments in the philosophy of science, particularly debates around scientific realism and constructivism. Scientific realists argue that science aims to uncover objective truths about the world. In contrast, constructivists argue that all knowledge is socially constructed and shaped by cultural, historical, and social factors (Hacking, 1999). These debates are particularly salient in the social sciences, as they raise fundamental questions about the nature of social reality and the possibility of objective knowledge. As articulated by thinkers like Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, social constructivism posits that reality is socially constructed through interactions and shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This view challenges the positivist notion of a fixed, objective social reality, emphasizing instead the fluidity and contingency of social phenomena.

At the same time, pragmatic approaches to social science have sought to move beyond these epistemological dichotomies. As developed by philosophers such as John Dewey and William James, pragmatism emphasizes the practical consequences of knowledge and advocates for a pluralistic approach to inquiry. In the social sciences, pragmatism has been influential in promoting

methodological pluralism, encouraging using quantitative and qualitative methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Dewey, 1938). This approach is particularly valuable in fields such as sociology and anthropology, where the complexity of social life often requires multiple methods and perspectives to grasp fully.

In summary, the theoretical background of the epistemological foundations of social sciences is rich and varied, encompassing a wide range of perspectives and debates. From the early contributions of positivism and interpretivism to the recent developments in critical realism, feminist epistemology, and social constructivism, these debates reflect the ongoing struggle to define the nature of social knowledge. Understanding these epistemological frameworks is essential for social scientists as they navigate the complexities of studying human behavior and social structures.

Results

1 .Positivism and the Pursuit of Objectivity

Positivism has long been regarded as one of the foundational epistemological frameworks that sought to establish social sciences as empirical and objective fields of study. Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim were early proponents of this approach, which emphasized the need to apply the methods of the natural sciences—observation, measurement, and quantification—to social phenomena. Durkheim, in his seminal work *Le Suicide* (1897), sought to uncover social "facts" that were external to individuals yet governed their behavior by treating these social facts as objective entities that could be studied empirically. Positivism aims to identify general laws governing social behavior, like natural laws governing physical phenomena.

The value of positivism lies in its emphasis on the objective observation of social reality, using quantitative methods such as surveys, experiments, and statistical analysis. This approach has enabled social scientists to make significant strides in identifying patterns and correlations between social variables, such as Durkheim's discovery of correlations between social integration and suicide rates. Positivism's contribution to the social sciences is undeniable in providing empirical rigor and predictability in research.

However, the limitations of positivism become evident when addressing the complexities of human experience and behavior. The positivist focus on objective measurement often overlooks the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their actions and the cultural contexts in which they operate. By treating social behavior as something that can be observed independently of human consciousness, positivism has been critiqued for its reductionist approach, which views individuals as passive subjects rather than agents capable of shaping their social realities. As a result, positivism struggles to account for the nuances of human behavior shaped by personal beliefs, emotions, and social contexts.

2. Interpretivism: The Turn Toward Subjective Understanding

In contrast to positivism, interpretivism represents a paradigm shift that recognizes the importance of understanding social phenomena from the subjective perspective of individuals. Max Weber's concept of *Verstehen* (interpretive understanding) laid the groundwork for this approach by

emphasizing that social action cannot be fully understood through empirical observation alone. Instead, Weber argued that researchers must interpret the meanings individuals assign to their actions, often influenced by cultural and symbolic frameworks (Weber, 1904). This marked a critical departure from the positivist emphasis on objective measurement, moving toward a focus on qualitative methods that seek to capture the lived experiences of individuals.

Interpretivism is particularly effective in uncovering social life's symbolic and cultural dimensions. Methods such as ethnography, participant observation, and in-depth interviews allow researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning within their social environments. For instance, symbolic interactionism, a key branch of interpretivism, focuses on how individuals use symbols and language to communicate and form social realities. This approach has proven valuable in fields like anthropology and sociology, where understanding the cultural context of behavior is essential.

Despite its strengths, interpretivism has also faced criticism for its perceived lack of scientific rigor. Critics argue that interpretive methods can lead to subjective bias, as they rely heavily on the researcher's interpretation of social phenomena. Additionally, because interpretivism focuses on specific cases and contexts, generalizing findings or developing universal laws is often difficult. This raises important epistemological questions about the balance between in-depth understanding and the broader applicability of research outcomes.

3. Critical Realism: Bridging Objectivity and Subjectivity

Roy Bhaskar's critical realism offers a synthesis of positivism and interpretivism by acknowledging the existence of objective social reality while also recognizing the role of human interpretation in understanding that reality. Bhaskar's critical realism posits that social phenomena exist independently of our knowledge, but our understanding of these phenomena is always mediated by social, cultural, and linguistic factors (Bhaskar, 1978). This approach integrates empirical observation and interpretive analysis, providing a more comprehensive view of social realities.

Critical realism is particularly effective in addressing the limitations of both positivism and interpretivism. While it maintains that social structures can be studied empirically, it also emphasizes the importance of uncovering the underlying mechanisms and causal powers that may not be immediately observable but shape social behavior. For example, Margaret Archer's work on structure and agency highlights how social structures constrain individual actions, but individuals also possess agency and the ability to act within these constraints (Archer, 1995). This dual focus on structure and agency allows critical realism to account for the complexity of social life in a way that neither positivism nor interpretivism can achieve alone.

Moreover, critical realism provides a framework for addressing issues of power and inequality, which are often neglected in positivist approaches. By recognizing that social structures—such as economic systems, political institutions, and cultural norms—shape individuals' opportunities and constraints, critical realism opens the door for a more critical analysis of social phenomena. This makes it particularly well-suited for addressing social justice issues and exploring how marginalized groups experience and navigate societal structures.

4. Epistemological Synthesis and Methodological Pluralism

The results of this analysis suggest that no single epistemological approach is sufficient to capture the complexity of social phenomena fully. Positivism provides the empirical rigor necessary for measuring and predicting social patterns, while interpretivism offers the depth to understand social actions' subjective meanings. By integrating both perspectives, critical realism offers a more holistic view of social reality that accounts for the objective structures and subjective experiences that shape human behavior.

This epistemological synthesis points to the need for methodological pluralism in the social sciences. Rather than adhering strictly to one epistemological framework, researchers can benefit from combining quantitative and qualitative methods to understand social phenomena better. For instance, combining survey data with ethnographic fieldwork can provide both the broad, generalizable insights that positivism offers and the nuanced, context-specific understanding that interpretivism brings.

In light of these results, the central question that emerges is: How can social scientists effectively integrate these diverse epistemological perspectives to produce scientifically rigorous knowledge sensitive to human experience? This question challenges researchers to move beyond rigid methodological boundaries and to adopt a more flexible, pluralistic approach to studying social life. The synthesis of positivist, interpretivist, and critical realist perspectives offers a pathway toward achieving this goal, allowing for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the social world.

Discussion

As explored in this paper, the epistemological foundations of social sciences reveal a dynamic and ongoing dialogue between objectivity and subjectivity, empirical rigor and interpretive depth, and the structural forces of society and individual agency. The tension between these paradigms—positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism—highlights the complexity of studying human behavior and social phenomena. These epistemological approaches offer valuable insights but pose distinct challenges, mainly when considered in isolation.

Reconciling Positivism and Interpretivism

Positivism, with its focus on empirical observation and objective measurement, has been instrumental in establishing the scientific credibility of the social sciences. The ability to measure, quantify, and predict social phenomena has allowed researchers to uncover significant patterns and correlations that have advanced our understanding of social structures. However, as highlighted in the results, positivism's emphasis on objectivity can often obscure the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their actions. This limitation becomes particularly evident when studying human experiences that are deeply personal, symbolic, or culturally bound.

Interpretivism, conversely, provides a necessary corrective to positivism by foregrounding the importance of subjective meaning and human agency. Weber's insistence on understanding social action from the perspective of the individual actor brings a level of nuance and depth often missing from purely quantitative studies. However, as the results demonstrate, interpretivism's focus on context-specific, qualitative methods can limit its ability to offer generalizable insights or to build predictive models. This raises a fundamental epistemological question: Is it possible to develop a

research approach that can capture the richness of human experience without sacrificing the empirical rigor required for scientific inquiry?

The answer to this question is recognizing that positivism and interpretivism need not be mutually exclusive. Instead, they can be seen as complementary approaches, each offering insights that the other lacks. The challenge for social scientists, then, is to find ways to integrate these paradigms to harness the strengths of both. This is where critical realism plays a crucial role.

The Promise of Critical Realism

As articulated by Bhaskar, critical realism offers a compelling solution to the epistemological divide between positivism and interpretivism by acknowledging the existence of objective reality and the socially constructed nature of our understanding of that reality. As discussed in the results, critical realism emphasizes the importance of uncovering the underlying mechanisms that shape social phenomena while recognizing that social, cultural, and historical contexts always mediate our knowledge of these mechanisms. This dual perspective allows critical realism to bridge the gap between the objectivity sought by positivists and the interpretive depth championed by interpretivists.

One of the key contributions of critical realism is its ability to account for causal complexity in social life. Positivism often focuses on observable correlations between variables, but critical realism digs deeper to explore the underlying structures and mechanisms that generate these patterns. For example, while positivist studies may reveal a statistical relationship between socioeconomic status and educational attainment, critical realism would push researchers to ask why this relationship exists—what are the structural, institutional, and cultural factors sustain this inequality? This approach enhances our understanding of social phenomena and opens up possibilities for social change by identifying the root causes of social issues.

Moreover, critical realism's recognition of human agency within structural constraints provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between individual actions and societal structures. This is particularly important in addressing power, inequality, and marginalization issues. By acknowledging that individuals shape and are shaped by social structures, critical realism offers a nuanced perspective that avoids the determinism of some positivist approaches while also addressing the limitations of interpretivism in analyzing broader social forces.

Methodological Pluralism and Epistemological Flexibility

The results of this study suggest that the future of social sciences lies in methodological pluralism—the integration of multiple epistemological approaches to create a more complete picture of social reality. Rigid adherence to a single paradigm, whether positivist, interpretivist, or otherwise, limits the scope of inquiry and reduces the complexity of social life to one-dimensional explanations. In contrast, adopting a pluralistic approach allows researchers to draw on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods while acknowledging the inherent limitations of each.

For example, a study on the impact of education on social mobility might combine quantitative surveys to measure mobility patterns with in-depth interviews that explore the personal experiences and perceptions of individuals navigating the education system. By integrating these methods,

researchers can gain both the empirical rigor of statistical analysis and the rich, context-specific insights that qualitative research provides. This approach aligns with critical realism's call for deeper, more layered analyses that consider both observable phenomena and the underlying structures and meanings that shape them.

In advocating for methodological pluralism, this paper does not suggest that all methods are equally valid in all contexts. Instead, it calls for epistemological flexibility—the ability to choose and adapt methods based on the research question and the specific social phenomena being studied. Such flexibility requires social scientists to engage with the epistemological assumptions underlying their methods critically, ensuring their approach is scientifically robust and contextually sensitive.

Implications for Future Research

Integrating these epistemological perspectives has significant implications for the future of social scientific research. First, the boundaries between different disciplines within the social sciences should become more porous. The challenges of studying complex social phenomena such as globalization, inequality, and technological change require interdisciplinary collaboration that draws on various epistemological and methodological tools. Second, this approach encourages researchers to be more reflective and critical of their positions within the research process. Recognizing that all knowledge is situated—shaped by social, cultural, and historical contexts—requires a commitment to reflexivity and transparency in producing knowledge.

Finally, the synthesis of positivist, interpretivist, and critical realist approaches provides a pathway for addressing some of our time's most pressing social issues. By combining empirical rigor with interpretive depth and critical analysis, social scientists can produce knowledge that is not only scientifically valid but also socially relevant. This approach is critical in studying phenomena that involve power dynamics and inequality, where understanding both the structural forces at play and the lived experiences of individuals is crucial for effecting meaningful social change.

the epistemological foundations of social sciences, though diverse and often contested, offer complementary insights into studying human behavior and social structures. Positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism each contribute valuable perspectives that, when integrated, provide a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena. The challenge for future research lies in finding ways to reconcile these approaches, employing methodological pluralism and epistemological flexibility to address the complexity of the social world. As social scientists, the goal should not be to privilege one method over another but to engage with the full spectrum of epistemological tools available to build empirically rigorous knowledge and be deeply attuned to the human experience.

Conclusion

Exploring the epistemological foundations of social sciences highlights the need for an adaptive and flexible approach to studying the complexities of human behavior and social structures. The diversity of approaches—positivism, interpretivism, and critical realism—reflects the inherent challenges in balancing objectivity and subjectivity, empirical rigor, and interpretive depth. This diversity is not a weakness of the field but a testament to the richness and multidimensionality of social inquiry.

In looking forward, the key challenge for social scientists is not to choose between these paradigms but to synthesize their strengths in meaningful ways. Each approach, while distinct, contributes to the broader goal of advancing our understanding of social phenomena. What becomes clear is that rigid adherence to any single epistemological framework may limit the depth and scope of our analyses. Instead, social sciences must embrace multiple perspectives, recognizing that different research questions may require different methods, and combining methods often leads to more nuanced insights.

One of the most promising developments from this exploration is recognizing the importance of contextual sensitivity in research. Social phenomena do not exist in a vacuum; they are embedded in complex cultural, historical, and economic contexts that shape their manifestation. Researchers must remain aware of these contexts and be willing to adapt their methods and frameworks accordingly. This approach calls for methodological pluralism and an e but also openness—a willingness to engage with diverse intellectual traditions and explore how they can complement and enrich one another.

Additionally, the emphasis on reflexivity is crucial. As social scientists, there is a growing need to critically examine our positions within the research process, acknowledging that our perspectives are shaped by the same social forces we seek to study. By being reflexive, researchers can mitigate potential biases and better understand how their values, beliefs, and contexts influence their research outcomes.

Finally, the ongoing integration of new theoretical perspectives, such as feminist and postcolonial critiques, signals an important shift in how knowledge is produced and validated. These perspectives challenge long-standing assumptions about objectivity and universality, pushing the field to consider more inclusive and representative forms of knowledge. As the social sciences evolve, they must remain responsive to marginalized voices and open to rethinking established frameworks in light of new evidence and perspectives.

In sum, the future of social scientific inquiry lies in its ability to evolve and adapt. The integration of various epistemological traditions, coupled with an openness to new ideas, will ensure that the social sciences remain relevant and capable of addressing the pressing social issues of our time. As society becomes more interconnected and complex, the ability of researchers to draw on diverse methods and perspectives will be key to unlocking deeper understandings of the human experience. This adaptive, flexible, and pluralistic approach will be the cornerstone of the social sciences in the future.

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