

PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNING AND PHENOMENOLOGY APPROACH IN SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper is based on literature review discuss the philosophical underpinning like epistemology and ontological frameworks of theoretical and philosophical perspectives. These are usually known and referred as paradigm in the field of research, that we simply identify them as a worldview or a set of assumptions about how things work. Paradigms are comprehensive framework of the beliefs, experiences and beliefs of numerous theories and research practices, which are extensively used in the research process. Basic questions like epistemology tries to answer that what is true or what does distinguish the authentic knowledge from the false and (inadequate) knowledge. This gives birth to basic questions that what is truth, and what counts the knowledge? What is the relationship amongst researcher and what is the already known? How do we come to know? Whereas ontology is oriented the nature of social realism and the things which exist, such as settings of their reality of relationships amongst the objects. The paper argues that phenomenological approach or strategy of inquiry is one of the best approaches in the qualitative research study.

Keywords: *Philosophical underpinning, Phenomenology approach, Social science research, Epistemology, Ontology.*

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INTRODUCTION

Every social science research begins with a question where a researcher poses the questions that how the investigator tries to understand existing social world, and how do scholars' socio-cultural expectations which are influenced by their study as cited in the works of (Bryman, 2004; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007; Patton, 2005, Khatwani, 2016, 2019). There is a critical epistemological debate whether social science research could be studied or conducted in accordance with the similar doctrines about natural sciences. The ontological assumptions or apprehension is about the reality and being and nature moreover, what exists there that how could come to know about realism. The significance of epistemology that how it attempts to answer the questions that what is true, and it finds the answers from the inadequate knowledge. It signifies the relationship between the knower and researcher as well.

Further, positivist approach in the field of social science research methods for logic of deductive approach having the pragmatic remarks and individual behaviour have also been part of this paper to determine and approve the set of possibility and unpremeditated laws as well, which accustomed to predicting universal forms of activity in humans (Newman, 2003). Besides, research paradigm is a way of philosophical thinking. While constructivism and interpretivism, is the process which makes an individual to create the meaning of 'lived experiences', while by means of the cognitive process to construct the meanings through social process. If we look in actual, researcher has set of diverse research philosophies that will help the researcher to reach at the philosophical underpinning and positioning of study. Whereas task of the researcher could be to justify and choose that which one is the best and the most suitable amongst philosophical and theoretical perspective in the available philosophies (Gray, 2009).

Phenomenology that has its roots in philosophy and its aim is to investigate consciousness as experienced by the subject, and the goal

of the phenomenological research define world experienced by respondents during inquiry, and to learn shared meanings and basic empirical distinction of a certain phenomenon (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992). Thus, choice of research in the field of social sciences is usually built on paradigms along with philosophical ideas, through that the researcher constructs research objectives, research questions and hypothesis which is a significant and decisive part of research process.

EPISTEMOLOGY

Epistemology attempts to answer the basic question of 'what distinguishes true (adequate) knowledge from false (inadequate) knowledge' (Bryman, 2001, p.18). Epistemology asks the following questions: What is the relationship between the knower and what is known? How do we know what we know? What counts as knowledge? The positivist epistemology, which evolved from the nineteenth-century philosophical approach, looked at the purpose of research as finding the scientific explanations for things. Blaikie (2007, pp.12-13) argues that basically epistemology and ontology are 'frameworks of theoretical and philosophical perspectives, and usually known and referred as a paradigm' (worldview or a set of assumptions about how things work). However, we need to discuss two distinguishing characteristics that form the core and on which they differ; namely, the assumptions made about the nature of the social reality, which is investigated into (ontological assumptions) and the related set of assumption about the way through the reality of knowledge can be obtained (epistemological assumption).

Epistemologies try to answer the fundamental question like 'what classifies true (sufficient) or false (insufficient) knowledge' (Bryman & Bell, 2001, p.18). Epistemology asks what is the relationship between the knower and what is known? How do we know what we know? What counts as knowledge? The positivist epistemology, which evolved from the nineteenth-century philosophical approach,

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Blaikie (2007, p. 12-13) argues that basically epistemology and ontology are 'frameworks of theoretical and philosophical perspectives, and usually known and referred as a paradigm' (worldview or a set of assumptions about how things work). However, we need to discuss two distinctive characteristics, which form an essential on which they vary. Explicitly, assumptions for the social reality and its nature are explored into ontological assumptions, which are related to a set of supposition making the way through the reality of knowledge, which can be obtained are epistemological assumption.

ONTOLOGY

The ontology word is taken directly from the 'Greek words' '*ontos*' that entails 'being' while '*logos*' meaning 'study'. Thus, it belongs to 'study of being'. However, for ontology we may say that is the starting point for any research after epistemological study and methods of study which are followed in the research. Ontological assumptions apprehension is that what is reality of nature and being, and moreover, what exists there which needs to be known about realism (Ponterotto, 2005).

Philosophy of ontology is oriented with the nature of social reality and the nature of things which exist, such as conditions of existence and relationships amongst these things (Blaikie, 2007). In social science research, ontological questions are associated with the nature of social realities. There are two wide and opposing positions in discourse about ontology: objectivism that holds that there is an independent reality and constructionism that assumes that reality is the product of social processes (Neuman, 2003). On the other hand, there are dissimilar research paradigms and research philosophies as well. Research paradigm having wide-ranging framework defines the beliefs, insights, and perceptions of numerous research theories as

well as practices, which are extensively used during research process (Kuhn, 1962). This leads to a comprehensive stepwise process and techniques that enable researcher to produce a link amongst the research questions, the specified objectives, analysis, and findings (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Henceforth, the research paradigms are the path of conducting and believing about research. Whereas, this does not mean firmly supposed to be a methodology, rather than the philosophy which gives guidance that how to conduct a research (Morgan, 2007).

RESEARCH PARADIGM

The Paradigm word was firstly used by Thomas Kuhn (1962) to represent a philosophical way of thinking. Therefore, it is an essential and vital for a researcher to put on a suitable paradigm in the field of research, where it is assumed to have the worldview, all along with numerous philosophical assumptions that matches with the accepted worldview (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2009). However, a researcher's worldview represents that how the world has been experienced by the researcher, based on researcher's personal values, principles, morals, and aesthetics (Morgan, 2007). Although, paradigms in the field of research are characterized in the various ways whereas the numerous scholars have applied fluctuating extents and magnitudes to distinguish them. Guba (1990) characterized the research paradigms like ontology (the reality of nature), epistemology (how to know something), and the methodology (how to practically discover some things). Such attributes produce the complete view that how is knowledge viewed by a researcher, and how does one see him/herself in relation to knowledge and what kind of strategy or methodology should be used to obtain the knowledge.

Interpretivism and constructivism

According to (Young & Collin, 2004) that constructivism is supposed to be a process where an individual tries to construct the meaning of

lived experiences, by employing the cognitive process to build the meanings through social process. Social constructionism and constructivism have dissimilar epistemological stances, but both are clearly inclined to support the essence of subjective or relative reality instead of objective reality.

Constructivism

Therefore, in the field of constructivism this always values the individual's cognitive behaviour and process which understands the mental constructs at the back of the world of people's and their lived experiences. Conversely, this also, values to the social processes like the interactions, and relationships, to understand the reality and to providing its meanings, which has a social instead than individual focus. Such as discussed that the constructivism always allows to a researcher to delve into individuals' cognitive processes at the back of their psychologically world of the experiences. Besides, social constructionism always values social processes (e.g., interactions, relationships, while interpretivism values individuals' subjective experiences) (Young & Collin, 2004).

Interpretivism

Interpretivism comprises various procedures which constructing the reality and meanings, like constructionism and another term used as a constructivism but the purpose of interpretivism is understanding the meaning of social phenomena. A key description of interpretivism is that this values the human subjective experiences more as compared to social constructionism and constructivism. Interpretivism leads to an 'empiricist methodology' for human enquiry. Schwandt (2003) discuss that an 'interpretive science' can be seen like symbolic interactionism. At a larger level, (interpretivism) distinguishes between social and natural sciences. It inclines to comprehend the significances of social phenomena while respecting human subjective experiences. Interpretivism having the philosophical stance significantly it is associated with

phenomenology, which able understanding the numerous social realities of respondents and their understandings, social positioning, as rooted in respondents' own experiences, that interpretivism values individuals' subjective experiences.

Interpretivist and constructivist paradigm

There is theoretical framework and perspective of an interpretivist and constructivist perception which often guides to the road map of the qualitative research, which perceives that world is constructed, interpreted, and experienced by the people in their relations with everyone and with wide of the mark of social systems (Tuli, 2011). Another, the interpretive researchers also do not approve that reality is simply 'out there' to which needs to be discovered and it exists regardless of positions, conditions, or perspectives of people. Interpretivist sees reality as a human construct and research paradigm are of the point of view that reality and meaning reaching at the point of socially constructed, which holds that people create their own sense about social realities. Interpretivists use qualitative research methodologies to examine, interpret and express social realities (Bassey, 1995; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Mackenzie and Knipe (2006) discuss that the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm is generated from the philosophy of phenomenology of Edmund Husserl's (Phenomenological movement from 1913 to 1930) and Wilhelm Dilthey's writings in the year (1867 to 1900) and other interpretive and hermeneutics' understanding. The constructivists research approaches have basic intention for understanding 'the world of human experience' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, p. 36) signifying that 'reality is socially constructed' (Mertens, 2005, p.12). Although Crotty (1988) states that knowledge created socially constructs the reality and meaning, which needs to be understood the intricate understandings from respondents' perspectives to comprehend the realities with which they deal. However, an interpretive paradigm undertakes that humans' actions are significant but needs 'to be interpreted and understood in the context

of the social practices' (Usher, 1996, p.18). Easterby-Smith and Thorpe (1994, p. 78) argue that an interpretive approach as assuming that 'the world and reality are not objective and exterior, but...are socially constructed and given meaning by people'. According to this paradigm the nature of inquiry is interpretative, and the purpose of inquiry is to understand a phenomenon, not to generalize to a population (Farzanfar, 2005).

Positivist approach

In the field of research, the positivist does not think themselves as substantial variables by their research and have a faith in the significance of them enduring disconnected from what they conduct research. Philosophical foundation of positivists believes that world exists which is foreseeable, where researchers may employ quantitative method for discovering it (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 8). The nature of social reality for positivists is that empirical facts exist in addition to personal ideas or thoughts and they are governed by laws of cause and effect. In addition, patterns of social reality are stable and knowledge of them is additive (Crotty, 1998; Neuman, 2003). The researcher with the positivist view thinks that reality is something that is 'out there' in the world and need to be discovered while using some conventional scientific methodologies (Bassey, 1995). In the positivist orientation, knowledge is offered and ought to be studied by employing the objectives. Besides, the research discoveries are frequently presented quantitatively, that express for them (Bassey, 1995; Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). Accordingly, the Newman (2003, p. 101-102) describes that 'Positivism always perceives social science as a systematized method for combining deductive logic with precise and empirical observations of an individual behaviour to discover and confirm a set of probabilistic causal laws that can be used to predict general patterns of human activity'.

CHOICE OF RESEARCH APPROACH

The choice of research approach is founded on paradigms, philosophical suppositions through that researcher blueprints research questions, inclusive research study, which is an essential and decisive part of research process. Inductive approach in conducting research is fundamentally used in qualitative study method while the converse, deductive approach is generally linked with quantitative study method. A quantitative study method is used to test a theory, set hypotheses, and deduce the generalizable application of a pre-set theory.

An inductive approach researcher is further dependent on primary sources of data or respondents' view for identifying the significance of the categories and themes in study, which in beginning starts to build theories. In the deductive approach, the researchers depend heavily on literature, preconceptions, and self-pre-understanding in starting point for research. This approach permits researcher for initiating study within data such as observations and narratives. From which theory is produces and theorise from the given phenomenon. This approach makes able to researcher for starting with hypothesis and theory.

Qualitative method: Phenomenological approach and its origin

All social scientists study varied and complex phenomena that are happening around us today and conduct historic evaluation of what has happened a century ago. Hence to define, discover and to know social phenomena, the researchers within social science employ diverse methodologies of research that are in general divided into research methodologies such as quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative traditionalists articulate suppositions, which are consistent with what is usually called positivist paradigm and have faith in that social observations should be treated as objects in much the same way that physical scientists treat physical phenomena (Guba & Lincoln, 1996). To the opposing, the qualitative classicists, also

called interpretivists or constructivists, decline the positivists' assumption, and consider human realities to be subjective, multiple and manifold and are socially constructed by their respondents. Dudley (2005) defined that to get in-depth information a qualitative method is useful whereby it has its uniqueness in which it collects data and tries to find out the quality and new, alternative explanations of the data. Patton (2005) discussed that qualitative research data is generally obtained through fieldwork observation, open-ended and in-depth interviews, and examination of written documents.

In the case of interviews, (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008) described that the qualitative method of interview is applied to get deeper insight and knowledge of research subjects or respondents. It explores the experiences, views, beliefs, and the driving force of an individual or respondent in the study. It provides a deeper understanding regarding the social occurrences and phenomenon surrounding the subject matter of research. Guion, Diehl & McDonald (2011) stated that the in-depth interview method of qualitative data collection is useful for research, because it creates in-depth knowledge about a subject matter. This is because in this research, open-ended questions are used to explore issues in a profound manner rather than just eliciting the answer of 'Yes' or 'No.' The feelings and perspectives of the respondents in the research are explored and noted clearly to form thematic knowledge. Creswell (2013, p.18) argued that a qualitative study is exploratory in nature and is highly useful for an issue that is little-known or understood or to which existing theories have not been widely applied. In addition, research findings in a qualitative methodology are frequently reported in descriptive way by using words.

Philosophical stance of phenomenology

In actual, the researcher has a determined of diverse research philosophies, which would help researcher arriving at philosophical underpinning and positioning of research study. However, task of the

researcher is justifying and choosing either philosophical position or theoretical standpoint that is the most suitable amongst existing philosophies and theoretical perspectives (Gray, 2009). Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and its aim is to investigate consciousness as experienced by the subject. Phenomenology holds as one of leading traditions in the 20th century philosophy. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) was considered as its founder, while the rest of famous proponents of phenomenology comprise: Adolf Reinach (1883–1917), Max Scheler (1874–1928), Edith Stein (1891–1942), Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), Aaron Gurwitsch (1901–73), Roman Ingarden (1893–1970), Alfred Schütz (1899–1959), Eugen Fink (1905–1975), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61), Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86), Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–95), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002), Paul Ricoeur (1913–2005), Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), Michel Henry (1922–2002), and Jean-Luc Marion (1946–) (Zahavi, 2003).

The goal of the phenomenology research is defining world- which is experienced by respondents of the study, to uncover the common meanings and basic empirical distinction of certain phenomenon (Baker, Wuest, & Stern 1992). Whereas the purpose of phenomenology is to study the phenomena as the appearances of things (Cohen, 1987, p.1356) that 'the discovery of the essence is the ultimate purpose of phenomenology philosophy'. That is why, Husserl's phenomenology is concerned with asking questions of knowledge about objects gained through conscious awareness (Sadala & Adorno 2002). Baker, Wuest & Stern (1992, p.1375) discuss that 'phenomenological research is to know other people's experiences in order to understand the deeper meaning of it in the context of the whole of human experience'. That is why phenomenology is one of the theoretical perspectives, which made researcher able to discover or recognize the 'unchanging' and 'inherent' narrative and analysis of issue (or phenomena) which is under the study (Langdrige, 2007).

A phenomenological approach or strategy of inquiry is one of the approaches in a qualitative research study, which engages in exploring the in-depth experiences to find out the real meaning of an issue. The phenomenological approach 'emphasises on the respondents' views, experiences and perspectives about the meanings of concepts, ideas and issues' (Grbich, 2012, p.92). On the other hand, Creswell (2007, p. 57-62) suggested that "this approach is applied where there is a need to require a greater understanding of phenomenon as explained by individuals who have experience regarding the subject of research". It emphasizes on how individuals who are interviewed understand, perceive, and make assumptions about the social world.

Gallagher and Francesconi (2012) pointed out that this approach aims to explore the sensitivity of lived experiences of people and is mainly an empirical approach in nature. Phenomenology philosophy is the most 'challenging' philosophy and strategy in conducting qualitative study and approaches. Owing to wide variations that make up and define the phenomenological research, (Norlyk & Harder, 2010) suggest prudence before selecting this approach. The objectives of phenomenology are discovering phenomena which are formerly unseen or forgotten issues, to unearth and explore the experience and meaning of phenomena. In phenomenology, rather than making implications or inferences from the research subjects, researchers seek to disclose meanings which look like 'hidden' or recognize the effect of a phenomenon.

Schneider and Whitehead (2013) discuss another goal of the phenomenological approach is to develop an understanding of a phenomenon through the specific human experience of the phenomenon, to better understand that experience of being in that 'life-world'. It serves better to understand a person's experiences, rather than to provide causal explanation of those experiences. Instead of understanding the parts of that experience, the phenomenological researcher is dedicated to understanding

experiences of phenomena in total.

Phenomenology enabled researchers while attaining 'subjective experience of the subject' (Gray, 2004, p. 21). It also generates the challenging to avoid preconceptions and researcher's biases on the subject of phenomena. Collecting the respondents to understand the meanings of a phenomena on their own merits, a researcher 'brackets' his/ her prejudices and existing comprehension of a phenomena and different 'subjective experiences' throughout the data collection process. This includes where there is a common behaviour that can be observed amongst respondents' while talking about phenomenon and issue. Speech or language styles of respondents could sometimes be considered rude and rough. The behaviour sometimes affects viewpoints about them during the interviews. However, since phenomenology aims to obtain respondents' subjective experience, researcher's own perspectives must be 'bracketed' and avoided during the collecting and interpretation of the data.

CONCLUSION

Philosophical stance in the field of research is not a new thing; but since immemorial researcher is in the search of finding ultimate truth and reality to discover the new and unique results of any phenomenon. Where a researcher employs a different philosophical mode like (ontology and epistemology) according to research topic, and qualitative approaches like (phenomenology, grounded theory, case studies, ethnography, etc.) based on the questions and objectives discussed in research methodology. Social Scientists apply the different approaches to find out the reality and truth of unknown phenomenon in social science field, while remaining in close contacts to the human beings to discover its behaviour or phenomenon.

Likewise, paradigms of study are also set according to the approach of study like the interpretivist or constructivist paradigm which are generated from the philosophy of phenomenology of Edmund

Husserl's interpretive as well as hermeneutics' understanding. Thus, the constructivists research approaches have basic intention to understand "the world of human experience". Phenomenology also discovers the personal experiences, understanding and attitude of human beings. It also directs to allocate value to these respondents' experiences and views in understandings and interpretations. Phenomenology, employing as theoretical perspective of any social science study, is much more matching with social interpretivism, which is not supposed to enforce a peripheral logic on a phenomenon. However, it embraces an inductive approach that allows recognizing core logic and reason of any subject. Therefore, within interpretive phenomenology, a researcher tries to seek the meanings, which are rooted in everyday incidences.

This approach provides rich descriptions that helps to understand of a phenomenon. Result of discovering knowledge in that researchers can better understood and the potentials, which are entrenched in understanding of a phenomenon. Using this approach, respondents are permitted to speak, and the researcher listened to their direct and indirect experiences about the phenomenon. Thus, paper concludes that in the field of social science research, the social researcher employs technique of philosophical stance in overall process of methodology; in actual sense tries to explore and find out the reality and ultimate truth. Employing this approach in a qualitative research study, engages to explore the depth experiences to reveal a real concept of a phenomenon. This phenomenological approach "emphasizes on the respondents' experiences and perspectives about the meanings of concepts, ideas and issues. Therefore, employing phenomenology approach in qualitative research attempts to achieve the real meaning and essence of phenomenon. Phenomenological strategy of inquiry is one of the best approaches in doing a qualitative research study in social sciences field, while engaging to explore in-depth direct and indirect 'lived experiences' of human being to reach at the maximum truth and reality of a phenomenon occurred or occurring with human being.

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