

Pluralism: Research Methodology for Social Sciences

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Abstract: *Social sciences include a variety of important subjects related to human behavior, and the knowledge in social sciences matter in day to day human activities both at micro and macro levels, though it is not as precise as that of natural sciences. Partly as a result of this, knowledge construction in social sciences needs to link up with philosophical roots while addressing on appropriate methodology. Generally, the subject matter investigated in social sciences is multidisciplinary in nature because of the multiple linkages of factors of a selected social issue. In order to carry out a research on a selected topic, there is a need to address on different methodologies and methods to analyze and assess identified dimensions of the issue. Without a holistic understanding of many facets of the evolving process related to the issue and their interaction with one another, selecting an appropriate methodology and dealing with different dimensions of the problem is difficult. Therefore, a model to bridge knowledge gaps in the evolving process and their retrospective and prospective linkages with objectivism and subjectivism in relation to different paradigms, i.e. positivism, interpretivism, radical humanism and radical structuralism with a focus on pluralism, is important in identifying the scope of a social science research. As per the study, pluralism which allows for social science researchers to have an open access for exploring the appropriate research methodology, research methods and analytical tools help the researcher to conduct more productive research while addressing on deliveries towards social progress in a stable and consistent manner.*

Keywords: Social sciences, natural sciences, objectivism, subjectivism, positivism, interpretivism, radical humanism, radical structuralism, pluralism

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the philosophical foundation of the social science research. This exploratory study will shed light on understanding the epistemological, ontological and ethnomethodological linkages of social science issues. The paper contains an overview explanation with respect to the evolution of the philosophical roots of social science research. Finally, the paper presents the linkages of pluralism as the social science research methodology that helps in dealing with both theoretical and empirical issues of social sciences with a focus on the social progress of mankind.

2. Philosophical Perspectives of Social Sciences

Philosophical questions about the meaning of existence, reality, nature of the world, knowledge etc. were issues of human society even in the early stages of human civilization (e.g. *The Republic* by Plato – the philosophy of the Western part of the world and Buddhist Philosophy in the Eastern part of the world). Philosophy, on the one hand, reduces confusions and on the other hand, it helps the mankind to understand the world and reality and it prepares the ground for the mankind to find new things for the benefit of individuals as well as the humanity as a whole. Along with the time, two major areas of disciplines namely, natural or hard sciences and social sciences have been developed with distinctive philosophical differences. The hard sciences focused on existing material phenomena whereas the social sciences focused on human behavior. The hard sciences are based on the experiences of the five senses whereas the social sciences are based on the experiences of five senses as well as mind related activities/experiences at the individual

level as well as social or totality point of view (collective conciseness). Therefore, the social science issues are philosophically rather complicated compared to hard sciences. In order to develop a methodology to study the problems of hard sciences, the positivist method is used. It is a scientific method which can be repeatedly tested for the confirmation of accuracy. Along with the time, social scientists also wanted to analyze and make conclusions precisely as in the hard sciences (Bacon, 1561-1626). This has been repeatedly tried by social scientists in the later stages. Among them, Carl Popper (1902-1994) who presented a complete set of methods for studying a problem is significant among others. Durkheim (1858-1917) giving attention to positivist approach and its preciseness had stated that a social scientist must study social phenomena in the same state of mind as the physicist, chemist or physiologist when he probes into a still unexplored region of a scientific domain (Durkheim, 1985 p21). Karl Marx (1818-1883) in his writing has stressed the impact of socio-economic and political structures on human behavior. The writing of Lenin (1870-1924) and Althusser (1918-1990) have mentioned that in order to understand the roots of socio-economic issues of a society, one has to go beyond the facts on the surface as real facts are hidden and covered with misleading information. Despite differences, many other philosophers in the later centuries have further disclosed the uniqueness of social science issues and their importance as soft sciences. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911) tried to incorporate inner experience of human beings into the research process. Max Weber (1864-1920), taking the focus to another direction, has tried to explain the Dilthey's inner experience as cultural impact on human behavior. Considering the complexity of social science issues, SBD Silva has mentioned the difficulty of having a unique approach to social science research. He

believed that social science researchers need to go to the philosophical root of the issue with a focus on the philosophical approach, and then only the researcher may analyze the issue and can come out with a theoretical or empirical outcome to the issue of the study.

Methodology to my mind is essentially a philosophical question dealing with the classification and arrangement of abstract ideas and concepts in a complex logical system. I use the complex because the investigation or the analysis of any problem in the social sciences is necessarily a complex (Silva, 1983: 38)

He has stressed on a multidisciplinary approach for both methodologies as well as the issue of social sciences that the researcher is focused on (De Silva, 1983). In spite of the diversity of thoughts of social science scholars, contemporary studies are still biased towards so-called scientific methods and have concentrated more on quantitative approaches and the west-oriented rationale. Therefore, the effectiveness of such knowledge, especially as far as the final deliveries towards social progress is concerned, has become insignificant relative to the time, resources, energy, and to the number of replicated studies of social science research. Therefore, revisiting the philosophical base of social science research methodology with a focus on inner experience and its impact on human behavior followed by human action is very important. These efforts would enlighten researchers in studying contemporary problems and the world drawing their attention towards tangible outcomes to modern society in the new millennium.

3. Philosophy of Social Science Research

The purpose of research is to discover something about the world [1]. Such research contributes to the knowledge accumulation under different disciplines and helps to understand the world and finally in the progress of mankind. It is applicable to both hard sciences as well as social sciences. In the knowledge accumulation, there is a vast difference between hard sciences and social sciences. With respect to hard sciences, the subject matter is on existing material things. Therefore, for positivists the methodology [2] is precise and it can be extrapolated continuously to filter knowledge and to invent new knowledge. Therefore, the validity of positivism for hard sciences, where all knowledge is based on perceptual experience, remains to continue with less variation compared to social sciences. Thus the change of paradigm or paradigm shift on the knowledge in hard sciences is also comparatively marginal or slower.

With respect to social sciences, human behavior is highly sensitive to environment because of the mind-matter, and therefore, the positivist approach cannot be used in a similar or uniform way as done in natural sciences. Even though dynamism applies for existing material things which are the subject matter in hard sciences, it takes a relatively longer time period for such change as the sensitiveness is less because of the remote linkages of the mind-matter with the existing material things. Therefore, positivism is sufficient in explaining the issues connected to nature, its changes and the relationship with other living and non-living things as far

as the targeted objectives are concerned. On the contrary, with respect to social sciences, in understanding the existing behavior and the forecasted behavior, there is a need of new methodology that has to be found while dynamism is taken into consideration mainly because human behavior is determined by individual and collective consciousness. Therefore, there is a strong restriction for the use of positivism in explaining social reality. Unlike the "hard matter reality" [3] in natural sciences, there is a difficulty in identifying a social reality through contemporary theories of social sciences. In this situation, there is a need for new approaches to understand and explain social reality and its movements under different social science disciplines.

In the process of scholarly contribution by different philosophers, especially after Thomas Kuhn's Paradigm Shift concept, new ideas were forwarded to produce new knowledge under new assumptions that were based on ontology, epistemology, human will and ethnomethodology. Here there are two major paradigms in which social science knowledge has been constructed. They are the objectivism and subjectivism. Under these two paradigms, there are four sub paradigms. 1. Positivism, 2. Interpretivism, and 3. Radical humanism 4. Radical structuralism.

3.1. Positivism or Functionalism

The positivist approach was originally presented by Bacon (1561-1626), and Comte (1798-1857) extended Bacon's idea to the social sciences. According to Comte, beliefs, values etc. that are coming under social sciences can be measured as facts. Therefore, under positivism, what is acceptable is only the concepts, analyses, ideas that can be filtered through experience that is compatible with the so-called five senses. All assumptions with respect to the ontology epistemology, human will and finally ethnomethodology is objectively based just as in hard sciences. In other words, the assumptions are relative to the experiences of senses. Popper (1902-1994) going a step further has unified the research methodology that is the positivist method, for natural sciences and social sciences. This is consistent with Durkheim (1858-1917) who has said that the social scientist also should study phenomena just as a physicist (Durkheim, 1985:21). In this situation, according to the positivist approach, only the forms of knowledge that are compatible with the empiricism or logic are tolerated. In other words, knowledge can be derived from either the deductive or inductive method. Under positivist method the statements are universal and they can be either be falsified or confirmed repeatedly. However, what has been ignored here is the nature of human behavior associated with dynamism, which is determined by the changing individual and collective consciousness.

Individual consciousness is on the one hand determined by the current consciousness which is based on the accumulated consciousness. Therefore, the experiences of five senses along would not sufficiently reflect the reality of human behavior.

The collective consciousness which is also important in social behavior is required to be measured in concept building and making theoretical statements. Positivists argue

that measuring of individual consciousness as well as collective consciousness should also be done in line with the methods used in natural sciences. The argument as per collective consciousness is based on the theoretical presumption that leads to believe that institutions such as languages, economic organizations, laws, customs, religions etc. that represent the collective consciousness are independent of the human will (Durkheim, 1858-1917). Structural functionalism which focuses on structures of society (e.g. economic classes), system theory which focuses on different systems, their independent functioning and the connectivity, the interactions are the supplementary explanations with respect to the positivist paradigm in line with social sciences.

The positivists believed that:

- 1) Reality consists of what is available to the senses (five senses)
- 2) Science constitutes a framework by which any form of knowledge can be determined.
- 3) Natural and human sciences share common logical and methodological foundations and methods of natural sciences can be applied in social sciences as well.

There is a fundamental distinction between facts and values. Science deals with facts while values belong to an entirely different order of discourse beyond the remit of science. Because of these assumptions, social science methodology turns towards empiricism rather than positivism.

3.2 Interpretivism

Positivists believe that the reality is there in the outer world. Therefore, whatever interacts through the five senses reflects the reality of the world for them. The empirical evidence of the social reality has led to questioning the human psyche and as a consequence the individual uniqueness towards stimulus has been observed. People create and attach their own meanings to the world around them and to the behavior they manifest in that world (Schulz, 1978). Phenomenologists call this the world of created meanings and consciousness as the life-world [4]. They argue that unlike atoms, molecules and electrons which have no meaning to one another, people do mean something to one another. Here the meaning may be subjective but effective as far as the study of individual and social behavior is concerned because the inner meaning that leads to the production of an individual becomes crucial in behavior change. The inner meaning of an individual continues in a hierarchical manner and therefore, an origin of an empirical observation holds a unique process which has to be dealt with separately from others. However, the collective consciousness and the collective relationship cannot be ignored here, and there is a need of due consideration in explaining the issue. The study of social reality through the procedure in which the individual fixes the meaning is called interpretivism. Wilhelm Dilthey (1831-1911) and Storig (1959) argue that human behavior cannot be explained just only in a rational way. A contextual reference (government, legal frame, literature, social institutions), time factor, spirituality, morality etc. should be considered in the interpretation of the meaning of the issue. For example, the study of history is not the study of events, but giving consideration to the above factors with the

interpretation of the specific meaning to get an explanation for the totality. In "fixing meaning" both the verbal and the implied meaning of an individual, individual behavior or collective institutions and collective behavior is important (Kaiser and Silva, 2007). Interpretivism gives attention to all kind of individual "meaning fixing" [5] of the lifeworld. Positivists have ignored this individual subjective involvement and bias on the mechanistic relationship and therefore, there have been empirical problems in the application of such theories, especially in the face of expected deliveries for society through knowledge construction. In this situation, interpretivism is important as this approach gives attention to sensory experiences, intuition, interpretation as well as the empathy, unipathy, antipathy, sympathy, mimpathy of the respective individual/s where mind-matter is connected. If these individual distinctive features (the uniqueness) are not taken into account, the study of social behavior will end up with wrong decisions with negative effects rather than a relief expected from the production of knowledge. [6]

The interpretivism paradigm is comprised of different schools based on the subjective approach in looking at human behavior. Among these schools ethnomethodologists [7] (ethnomethodology), phenomenologists [8] (phenomenology), and naturalists [9] (naturalism) are important. The interpretivism basically relies on qualitative research methods than quantitative methods. The grounded theory method is popular in building theoretical knowledge as interpretivism is generally not based on well-focused precise hypothesis as we observed under positivism but a working hypothesis that might apply in a given context are best verified and confirmed by the people who inhabit that context. Participatory observation and case studies may be the major research tools for interpretivism.

3.3. The Radical Humanist Paradigm

This particular paradigm is also based on subjectivism where individual value system is given prominence in the determination of social behavior. The radical humanism believes that human consciousness is an active entity in the determination of the outside world. According to the argument, an individual externalizes his or her experiences and becomes conscious of his or her own actions. The individual action and behavior leads to the construction of different kind of structures. If society is unequal, the relations between the individual and the society are alienated (Burrell and Morgan, 1979). This paradigm has lot of affinities with the early Marxism as both Marxism and radical humanism are based on Hegel's philosophy. The so-called alienation with property owners and property fewer people based on the ideas of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Weber, Lucas, Freud and many others. Human radicalism focused on the conflict between the parts and the totality which will be sustained until the true exposure of the parts and the totality. According to the argument, there will be a revolutionary change in the consciousness. However, it is said that there is never as transparent as there is a constant interaction between the parts and the totality. The individuals are subservient to the means as well as to the outputs of production. Technological society controls the values of freedom and pleasure. The satisfactions

that are available in a modern capitalist society is contrived and unreal. The so-called wants are forced on them. Only in free society that an individual's true wants and true pleasure will be satisfied. Such a free society will dawn only when the means of production are controlled by the community.

3.4. Radical Structuralism

This paradigm is based on the differences between individual parts or organisms and the totality on the one hand and on the other hand the structural constructions. The radical structuralism and the radical humanism are different from each other as far as the assumption that consciousness is based on structures and not the structures on the consciousness concerned. In other words beings are based on structures according to radical structuralism but not the structures based on the beings or vice versa. Because of this significant difference, structuralists are objectivists and the humanists are subjectivists. When comparing humanism with structuralism, we observe that the early writings of Marx are in line with humanism, whereas his later writing assumed that the beings in the world are based on structures and therefore in order to change the beings the structures have to be changed. The structuralists are basically materialistic and mechanistic. According to structuralists, mechanistic nature follows thoughts and consciousness and not the vice versa as humanists argue.

3.5 Post Modernism

In each paradigm, the theoretical knowledge building is done by researchers whereas the laymen and the political authority inclusive of researchers are benefited as the theoretical knowledge helps for laymen as well as political authorities in repairing the distorted social behavior at individual as well as social levels. The repairing process is a diversified dynamic mechanism which is based on the theoretical explanations followed by policy introduction and their implementation. The four paradigms that we discussed in the above also come under the same parameters. These paradigms can again be categorized under subjectivism and objectivism. Despite distinctions in each paradigm, the evaluation of each paradigm is determined by the individual in society and the political authority that holds the responsibility of the particular society as a collective entity. Therefore, the acceptance and pushing for a new paradigm is dependent on the theoretical contents in the paradigm that helps in explaining and finding solutions for social science problems. In this situation, postmodernists argue that social scientists should give priority to social science problems rather than philosophical problems. In this background, modernization and industrialization are under attack together with the idea of progress, and thus much concern on revisiting of the environment and the ethics of the particular social entity. Therefore, the so-called scientific revolution and its achievements are under a massive cloud of doubt and uncertainty (Chandraratne and Smith, 1997:107). In this situation, it has been a strongly felt requirement of postmodern thoughts to deliver justice equality, freedom and perpetual happiness that are the expectations of society as individuals and also as a social entity. The postmodern thoughts, however, do not totally reject either the knowledge or the theoretical paradigms that are accumulated in the

literature under different disciplines. The postmodern thoughts have allowed for the accommodation of the existing knowledge as well as the nature of the change of human being as well as the requirements. Chandraratne and Smith (1997) have given the architecture as an example to understand the restriction of the theories under different paradigms and the importance of postmodernism.

Architecture is taken as a good illustrative example of postmodernism because it displays postmodernism palpably. In place of elite and ordinary cultures, it accepts a diversity of all cultures, a plurality of styles. It accepts that different people will want different things and the same people will at different time's different things (Chandraratne and Smith 1997)

Postmodernism prefers to see the world through humanized science, progress, and autonomy of individual expression and meaning. Therefore, there is no absolute knowledge that can be held as believed by most positivists. According to Parker (1989), all knowledge is provisional and transitory, gained through continuous reflexivity provoking an attitude of uncertainty. The attention is directed at gaps, silences, ambiguities, and power relations of the paradigms of modernity. These regimes and constellations of truth or paradigms are deconstructed. The postmodernists do not believe the concept of reality. According to them, the reality is an unordered entity that is unable to be grasped by the ordinary human mind.

4. Pluralism: Research Methodology for Social Sciences

The debates of both inter and intra paradigms and different views of postmodernism makes it evident that the so-called reality is not realistic to be observed. It is argued that instead of deriving a reality, the transformation of knowledge is witnessed over different time periods. In this situation, the new thoughts in the field of social sciences have created necessary conditions for a new paradigm where both subjectivism and objectivism are incorporated. This can be considered as an infantry paradigm as noted by Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996), until the equilibrium of that paradigm takes place. In order to reach for such equilibrium, there is a need of time during which philosophical issues are filtered.

The knowledge beyond empirical experiences that has led to numerous researches around the world has questioned the positive approaches of social sciences, and on the other hand the problems of forecasting and generalization of research findings have limited the use of subjective approach and finally both types of researches are less effective as far as the respective social deliveries in the empirical world are concerned. Apart from the knowledge that is linked with empirical experience which is conventionally limited to five senses, there is a large portion of knowledge that is beyond the five senses out of which a greater percentage is yet to be explored. According to Parapsychological arguments, the knowledge that we are in access is the knowledge that is filtered within a limited dimensional form. There is a vast area of knowledge that is beyond this existing dimensional capability. Therefore, there is a need for a new theoretical paradigm or paradigms for researchers to explore and

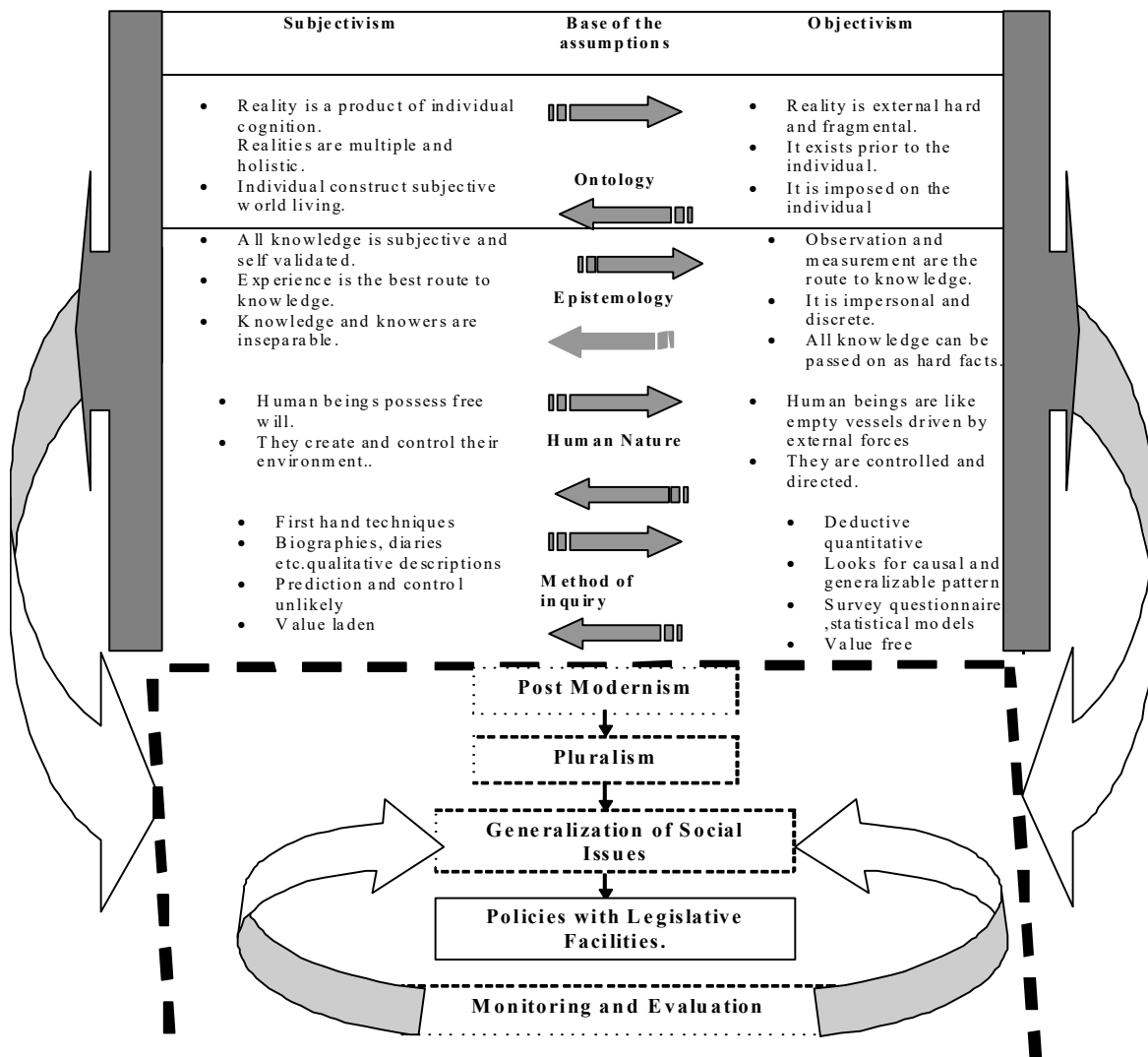
demarcate the boundaries of the theoretical settings of different disciplines especially the social sciences. In this situation, the methods that are tailored within the five senses are not sufficient because knowledge accumulation is dynamic, and therefore, the procedure should also be dynamic [10]. It should have the ability to derive generalized relationships and concepts than that of “layman analysis”[11]. Therefore it is a requirement for researchers to give attention to alternative methodological considerations in gathering knowledge. In this context, just similar to knowledge filtered empirically by pro positivist studies, there is a need for giving attention to the accumulated knowledge individually and socially in the conscious and unconscious mind that is rooted to the historical traditions in isolation in different parts of the world as social traditions. Exploration of such knowledge needs to be extrapolated to understand philosophical roots of the study problem with respect to the methodology as well as the theoretical bases of the problem. Therefore, a pluralism which is a grounded outcome of all the methodological schools would be a better approach in using a methodology for social science studies (refer to retrospective and prospective the inter and intra relationships presented in Figure 1).

Here, under pluralism, it is possible to filter the knowledge as it addresses ontological, epistemological and ethnomethodological bases of the philosophical issues. However, it is noteworthy to stress the need for revolutionary type of studies in social sciences as the philosophical bases mentioned above are to be filtered and cleared further. Relative constructivism presented by Professor Nalin de Silva is one of such effort that can develop into new epistemological contribution to knowledge building that enlightens the path for such studies, and these opportunities are possible through pluralism

The pluralism referred here is an outcome of merged fundamental methods in the light of postmodernism (refer to diagram 1). There, the objectivism and subjectivism are mutually cross checked and grounded and filtered in generalizing social science issues. Revisiting the primary steps is done continuously and changes are made when and where there is a requirement for the betterment of the targeted social group or stakeholder requirements. Here the process takes place continuously and therefore generalization always takes place with necessary changes for future policies. Further, mistakes and costs of such mistakes are assessed for the benefit of the accuracy of future policies. This can be done at the monitoring and evaluation stage or the post-policy implementation stage.

Figure 1

Paradigm Linkage of Pluralism



5. Concluding Remarks

In pluralism, we as social scientists have opted for multiple philosophical roots if it is reasonably justifiable in founding the base to generalized explanation within the conceptual framework. However, here, the researcher should be matured enough to select the appropriate base out of a range philosophical schools. This is important in studying social science issues as it depends on the subject matter and the particular context for where the issue is applicable. Here, the advantage is that the researcher needs not to presume the philosophical base as well as the methodology or the methods, but he can select whatever applicable in the process of analysis in the research. The researcher is having an open access to start the research journey. Here it is true that the cost of research and the possibility of misuse of the open access are high, but if the researcher is genuine and is controlled by the subject authority through an ethical review process, such misuse and cost can be minimized. Therefore, pluralism enables for worthwhile research with a focus on social progress through theoretical and empirical contributions rather than pre-conceptualized research with a focus on research rather than problem-oriented research. Therefore, in contemporary society where social scientists are facing serious challenges in providing outcome-based research for social progress, Pluralism would provide a productive mechanism to carry out successful social science research.

Notes

- 1) The term 'world' here refers not just to the globe but the whole totality.
- 2) Positivist method based on observation experiment and conclusion
- 3) Here the hard matter refers to the existing material things in the world. Even though the existing material things are not subjected to change under the three dimensional analysis, they are subjected to change under the postmodern science. However, these changes are hardly observed through the five senses. As a result, the hard matter reality is continued as a reality. However, this may not be a reality if we can see things through extra sensory perception (ESP) which is a debating issue among the academic community.
- 4) "Life world" concerns all individual and institutional actions and reactions around them in the world and in the universal atmosphere.
- 5) Each individual behaves in his own way .An individual understands and interprets relative to his or her context that is determined by the factors within the individual and his environment. Here the "meaning fixing" refers to such unique perception of an individual.
- 6) Social Sciences deal with words and/or other implied expressions. Therefore, what is communicated is not neutral or value free like in the case of other material things. A person regarded by one as a terrorist may be regarded as a nationalist by another. Liberation to one man may be imprisonment to another. If a phenomenon is analyzed without giving attention to this particular complexity because of its analytical difficulty, it might be possible to make wrong decisions.
- 7) Emphasized on ethno structure on the perception of an individual.
- 8) Emphasized on individual imaginary perception that effects on human behavior.
- 9) Emphasized on realism. They believe that just like in natural sciences, there is an existing realistic behavior which has to be sought.
- 10) The theoretical concepts in the social sciences are endless. No terminal ends can be found. Therefore, holding boundaries is invalid especially in a situation where there is an individual uniqueness of behavior.
- 11) If the analyses are general they cannot be applied on similar occasions or cases, and there is no theoretical value in other similar or advanced analyses or in policy making that are connected to final deliveries towards social progress. We call them laymen's analyses. They also can be called as pros and cons or gossips.

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