

SOCIAL RESEARCH

Theory, Methods and Techniques



PIERGIORGIO CORBETTA

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Translated from the Italian by Bernard Patrick



SAGE Publications
London • Thousand Oaks • New Delhi

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First published 2003

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SAGE Publications Ltd
6 Bonhill Street
London EC2A 4PU

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
Post Box 4109
New Delhi 110 017

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7619 7252 8
ISBN 0 7619 7253 6 (pbk)

Library of Congress Control Number 2002112356

Typeset by C&M Digital (P) Ltd., Chennai, India
Printed in Great Britain by The Alden Press, Oxford

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Introduction

One of the problems facing a teacher of social research methodology is the shortage of manuals of a general, introductory nature. Recent years have witnessed an ongoing process of fine-tuning of the techniques of collection and analysis of social data and a marked differentiation among research instruments. As regards the quantitative approach to research, these developments have involved both data collection (with the near hegemony of the survey, the growing importance of secondary analysis, centralized archives, panel studies, international comparative surveys) and data analysis (through the creation of increasingly sophisticated statistical techniques). At the same time, qualitative research has experienced a veritable boom in new methods and approaches which, under various labels (critical theory, semiotics, structuralism, deconstructionism, interpretive theory, biographical approach, etc.) have given fresh impetus to this way of tackling social research.

This process of fine-tuning and differentiation has been mirrored by the production of textbooks. Anyone who walks into a 'social research supermarket' will find the shelves stacked with manuals and handbooks, each one focusing on some particular subject or technique. If, however, the reader is looking for a complete general manual, a sort of 'first textbook' that explains what social research is, how it developed historically and how it can be undertaken today, in its various branches and different approaches, the search is likely to be an arduous one.

It is this need for a general synthesis that has given rise to the present volume. First of all, I believe that an introductory manual of

social research must necessarily start out by illustrating the philosophical foundations on which the various research methods have been constructed. The empirical approach to the study of society sprang from the enthusiasm of the positivist illusion at a time when it seemed that the research methods that reigned in the natural sciences and in technology could be applied to the study of man and society. This perspective, however, was soon challenged by those who maintained that the human sciences could not be equated with the natural sciences and that research on people and society had to be conducted along alternative pathways which would safeguard the intrinsic individuality and irreproducibility of the human being. It was in these two opposing views, which became consolidated at the beginning of the twentieth century, that the methods and techniques of social research were rooted, and I am convinced that without an understanding of this fundamental philosophical dichotomy it is impossible for the student to understand fully the spirit that animates the techniques themselves.

With regard to the methods of quantitative research, it was my intention to write a manual that did not focus solely on the survey as a technique of social investigation. Although this subject has been given the attention it deserves – today it is the most important and widely used social research technique – I have also dealt with experimentation in depth. This decision was based not only on the importance of experimentation in social psychology but also, and especially, on the conviction that only a complete understanding of the logic underpinning experimentation enables us fully to understand the issue of causality and how it

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can be tackled in the social sciences. In addition, I have also examined an important and often neglected source of social information: official statistics. Modern society generates masses of social statistics, which constitute a source of knowledge and provide an empirical base for important studies that cannot be carried out with other means.

At the same time, it was my aim to analyse the logic of social research and to devote ample space to the delicate passage from theory to empirical research, from hypotheses to concepts, indicators and variables; in other words, to the question of so-called 'operationalization'. While all these issues constituted the core of methodology in the 1940s and 1950s – a flourishing period for social research, which saw the great contribution of American sociology and in particular of Paul Lazarsfeld – in recent times they have risked slipping into oblivion. Over the years, the term 'methodology' has gradually become synonymous with 'statistical techniques of data analysis'. This has partly been due to the introduction of information technology and the widespread use of personal computers and specialized social research software. While such developments have given an enormous boost to the techniques of data processing, they have also been accompanied by a critical decline in attention to the procedures through which the data themselves are constructed and gathered. The negligence with which this phase of research is carried out, the lack of control and, in general, the scant sensitivity towards the accuracy of data and the reliability of operational definitions engender the risk of carrying out sophisticated elaboration of flimsy data, thereby producing 'garbage research'. It can never be repeated too often that no technique of analysis can improve the quality of the data, and that this quality – which is established *before* the analysis is undertaken – therefore imposes precise constraints on the validity of the results yielded by statistical analysis.

If a social research manual aims to be 'complete', it must of course place proper emphasis on the qualitative approach. As the reader

will see, I uphold the view that, although the quantitative and qualitative approaches to social research differ radically, they are nevertheless eminently complementary. According to whether we wish to access the 'world of facts' or the 'world of meanings', we will choose one approach or the other. Two different approaches to the same reality can both make significant contributions to our knowledge of that reality. Indeed, it is almost universally accepted that a painting by Raphael and a painting by Picasso are both works of art, and yet there is an enormous difference between the apparent naturalism and personal interpretivism of the two underlying artistic paradigms.

Nonetheless, the reader will notice that the greater space has been devoted to quantitative techniques. This does not mean that I consider the quantitative approach to be superior. Rather, the main reason behind this choice lies in the fact that the qualitative perspective, because of its very subjectivity, does not lend itself to formalization, and is therefore more difficult to transform into schematic procedures that can be communicated through a textbook. Unlike quantitative research, it does not possess a codified arsenal of techniques, and many of its procedures have to be worked out in the field, in the unique interaction between the observer and the observed. Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that in sociological experience (which constitutes the basic reference of this volume) the long tradition of quantitative research has, for at least 80 years, uninterruptedly accumulated an imposing array of tried and tested techniques. By contrast, the qualitative approach, after its rich and fruitful initial phase, became sidelined for the entire period (from the 1940s to the 1980s) in which neo-positivist sociology predominated, coming back into play only in recent years.

In discussing qualitative research, I have not only dealt with the best known and most commonly applied techniques, such as participant observation and qualitative interviews, but also with the 'analysis of documents', a heading under which I have grouped both

personal documents (letters, diaries, etc.) and institutional documents (court sentences, company reports, mass media output, etc.). In modern society, individuals and institutions produce huge numbers of documents every day; these constitute a treasure chest of empirical material for the study of the most diverse social phenomena.

My long experience in teaching has convinced me of the difficulty of 'learning to do research' without actually 'doing research'. Indeed, only by applying the techniques directly to theoretical problems and to empirical material can one become fully aware of both the potential and the limitations of these tools, and therefore learn to choose the strategies that fit the individual cases. Naturally, reading a book (or teaching by means of theoretical lectures) is by no means the same as learning or teaching through 'doing' (in fact, it is the very opposite).

In an attempt to offset (to some degree) this intrinsic shortcoming of the 'book medium', I have included in the text, wherever possible, a range of examples drawn from actual research. The purpose of these examples is to visualize the context in which the illustrated technique has been used, the questions that the researcher was trying to answer, the efficacy of the technique and the conclusions reached. These examples have been taken from sociology, anthropology, social psychology, political science, education and history, in order to provide as complete a view as possible of social research and its basic unitary nature. Naturally, however, my own scientific background and experience as a researcher have prompted me to place the accent on sociology. The strategy of using examples to illustrate techniques has been adopted most frequently in the part of the book that deals with qualitative research; in the absence of standardized methods, it seems to me that the use of examples taken from actual research projects is the best way of getting across to the student the great variety of situations encountered in qualitative sociology and its creativity in terms of technical solutions, approaches and documentary sources.

This book is intended to be rigorous, complete, and simple. Completeness demands that a wide range of subjects be dealt with; the first chapter has a vaguely philosophical slant, while some sections of the book – such as those on experimentation, sampling and scaling – contain a few more formalized passages. Rigor demands a certain attention to terminology, and the reader is constantly reminded of the definitions of terms; while these may seem prolix, useless or pedantic, in my view they help to maintain conceptual clarity and terminological accuracy. As for simplicity, I have taken as my point of reference a student who has absolutely no knowledge of social research. Hence, nothing is ever taken for granted and each concept or new term is explained as it is introduced. Moreover, I have tried to maintain a measured pace when explaining, without worrying about repeating myself, and bearing in mind the ancient Latin motto *repetita juvant* (repetition is helpful). As a result, some passages may appear excessively lengthy; however, I feel that this is preferable to excessive concision.

Simple does not mean simplistic. If some parts seem particularly simple, this means that I have succeeded in my aim. Nevertheless, the reader should beware of such apparent simplicity. Doing empirical research in the social sciences is a difficult challenge and one that has been faced by generations of scholars. It should be remembered that today's apparently simple acquisitions are the result of decades of discussion and argument, that many problems remain to be solved, and that solutions are never definitive, but rather bound to evolve over time.

This book is no mere introduction, nor does it claim to provide an exhaustive treatment of the field. Needless to say, the philosophical foundations and the technicalities of social research have not been discussed in depth. Although important, certain issues have been dealt with fairly rapidly; others have deliberately been omitted. In any case, even with regard to those issues that are dealt with more completely, the reader will need to refer to

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more specialized texts containing empirical applications, in order to become fully conversant with that specific sector. In this respect, the present volume only aims to provide as complete an illustration as possible of the potential, the fields of application and the variety of social research. It can therefore be regarded as a starting point for further investigation of the various techniques; there is no shortage of high-quality specialized material.

This book has been written with three types of reader in mind. First, social science students. Even if they are not destined to become actual 'empirical researchers', in other words to do research in the field, only through learning the methodology and techniques of social research will they be able to learn what social science *is*. Indeed, research methodology stands at the very core of the social sciences; it constitutes the essence, or distinguishing characteristic, of social science; it is indeed what makes social science a 'science', as distinct from other kinds of intellectual activity, such as philosophical speculation. No one who is interested in exploring the nature of the social sciences can do so without some familiarity with social research methodology.

Second, the book is intended for those who want to learn how to 'do research'. Clearly, for anyone wishing to become a professional researcher, it can be no more than a 'first book' and will be followed by many others dealing with specific issues (starting with a good statistics handbook). The present text should be able to provide such readers with a general overview – a solid base on which to build up subsequent knowledge.

Finally, it aims to be of use to the ordinary 'consumer' of social research. In all sectors and at all levels of modern society, among policy-makers, social workers, journalists and so on, there is a growing need to keep track of social phenomena. Such information often takes the form of avalanches of data, percentages, tables and graphs, research reports, case studies, international comparisons and statistical simulations, all of which require skills for informed critical interpretation. It is my hope

that this book will be able to provide the critical tools needed.

Outline of the book

The book is divided into three parts. The *first part* (Chapters 1 and 2) illustrates the two basic paradigms – quantitative and qualitative – of social research, describes their origins in philosophical thought, and outlines their current interpretations. The first chapter reconstructs the philosophical foundations of the two approaches and their historical genesis, and traces their subsequent development. In the second chapter, concrete examples are used to illustrate what quantitative and qualitative research consist of today. In addition, the differences between the two approaches are analysed point by point, starting from the ideal types of each kind of research.

The *second part* (Chapters 3–8) is devoted to quantitative research. Chapter 3 deals with the delicate phase of operationalization – a veritable bridge between theory and research. The chapter therefore examines theory, hypotheses, concepts and variables, and introduces the *language of variables*, which constitutes the true distinguishing feature of quantitative social research – a completely new way of talking about social reality, which differs from the traditional language of concepts.

Chapter 4 tackles the problem of causality. The concept of cause is central to all sciences, but it is also highly problematic; in the social sciences in particular, this concept is enormously difficult to transfer into the empirical setting. It could not therefore be overlooked in a book of this kind. The concept is dealt with alongside what is the most coherent attempt at empirical corroboration of the causal relationship, the experiment (with particular reference to the experiments conducted in social psychology).

Chapter 5 looks at the survey. Though this is only one of the data-gathering tools available in social research, it is currently the most widely used technique of social investigation. The in-depth examination of the subject begins with the fundamental problems that

arise when we attempt to study society by questioning its members, and then moves on to look at how questions are formulated and data are collected. Finally, an outline is provided of the current situation, in which large archives set up by national and international agencies provide data on which research can be carried out directly.

The subject of Chapter 6 is ‘scaling’ — that is to say, ‘measuring’ complex concepts. This issue is closely linked to those of the operationalization of concepts (Chapter 3) and the survey (Chapter 5), in that it largely involves ‘measuring’ opinions and attitudes, once again by questioning the subjects studied.

Chapter 7 focuses on official sources of statistics. Produced by governments (as in the case of the census) or by nationwide agencies, official statistics constitute a very important (and often under-exploited) source of information on society.

Finally, Chapter 8 concludes the part of the book devoted to quantitative research by exploring sampling issues, which are a prerequisite both for survey-based studies and for a great deal of research conducted through official statistics.

The *third part* of the book (Chapters 9–11) is devoted to qualitative research. Schematic analysis of this field is much more difficult than that of quantitative research, since the techniques used cannot easily be distinguished from one another and are often interwoven. The strategy adopted here has been to break down the analysis into three chapters according to whether the data-gathering operation is conducted through ‘observing’, ‘questioning’ or ‘reading’.

Chapter 9 looks at the oldest and most classical of the qualitative techniques, that of participant observation. A certain amount of space is also devoted to more recent developments and other types of observation, such as those utilized in a broad range of ethno-methodological studies.

Chapter 10 deals with the qualitative interview, which may be regarded as the qualitative counterpart of the survey. While the distinctions made (among structured, semi-structured

and unstructured interviews) may appear to be slightly contrived, they nevertheless meet the inevitable need to systematize the material for presentation in textbook form.

Finally, Chapter 11 discusses the analysis of ‘documents’. This term covers a host of documentary material autonomously produced by individuals and institutions, which the social researcher can gather and ‘read’.

To conclude this presentation, I wish to express my thanks to all those who have provided me with valuable advice, suggestions and ideas – in short, scientific dialogue. Various colleagues read parts of the book, and I discussed specific issues with others. In particular, I wish to thank Fabrizio Bernardi, Massimiano Bucchi, Sergio Brasini, Mario Callegaro, Giorgio Chiari, Antonio Cobalti, Asher Colombo, Giolo Fele, Pierangelo Peri, Marilena Pillati, Maurizio Pisati, Francesca Rodolfi, Raffaella Solaini, Marco Santoro and Antonio Strati. I am especially indebted to Alberto Marradi, with whom I discussed virtually every topic, and from whom I received precious intellectual stimuli. I would also like to thank my friends at the Istituto Cattaneo, Marzio Barbagli, Roberto Cartocci, Raimondo Catanzaro, Arturo Parisi, Hans Schadee and Giancarlo Gasperoni, with whom I shared many years of research and lively discussion, and who have surely left their mark on this book. I am also grateful to my friends at the Survey Research Center of Berkeley University – and to the directors Percy Tannenbaum, Mike Hout and Henry Brady – where I spent a sabbatical year and various subsequent study periods of full immersion in the American empirical research experience. Among my American colleagues at Berkeley, my special thanks go to Tom Piazza and Jim Wiley for their lengthy and substantive discussions and valuable suggestions. I am particularly grateful to Jon Stiles, whose help in adapting the chapter on Official Statistics to the American and British contexts was fundamental. Finally, I wish to thank Bernard Patrick, who tackled the arduous task of translating the text from Italian to English with creativity and competence.

Part One

The Logic of Social Research

1 Paradigms of Social Research

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3. Positivism	13
4. Neopositivism and postpositivism	17
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This chapter illustrates the philosophical bases of the two basic approaches to social research which gave rise to the families of quantitative and qualitative techniques. We will begin with the concept of paradigm – that is, the perspective that inspires and directs a given science. Then we shall examine the historical roots and the guiding principles of the positivist and the interpretive paradigms. The chapter ends with a few reflections concerning current trends in social research.

1. KUHN AND THE PARADIGMS OF SCIENCES

The notion of ‘paradigm’ has ancient origins in the history of philosophical thought. It was utilized both by Plato (to mean ‘model’) and by Aristotle (to mean ‘example’). In the social sciences its use has been inflated and confused by multiple and different meanings: these range from a synonym for theory to an internal subdivision of a theory, from a system of ideas of a pre-scientific nature to a school of thought, from an exemplary research procedure to the equivalent of

method. It seems useful therefore briefly to review the meaning given to the concept of the paradigm by the scholar who, in the 1960s, brought it once again to the attention of philosophers and sociologists of science. We are referring to Thomas Kuhn and his celebrated essay *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).

Reflecting on the historical development of the sciences, Kuhn refuted the traditional understanding of the sciences as a cumulative and linear progression of new acquisitions. According to the traditional conception, single inventions and discoveries would be added to the previous body of knowledge in the same manner as bricks are placed one on top of another in the construction of a building. According to Kuhn, however, while this is the process of science in ‘normal’ times, there are also ‘revolutionary’ moments, in which the continuity with the past is broken and a new construction is begun, just as – to take up the building metaphor again – from time to time, an old brick building is blown up to make room for a structurally different one, for example a skyscraper made of glass and aluminium.

Kuhn illustrates his argument with a rich collection of examples from the natural

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sciences (especially from physics). For instance, he cites the development of optical physics, which is currently interpreted in quantum terms; according to this view, light is made up of photons, which display some of the features of waves and some of the properties of particles. Kuhn points out that, before quantum theory was developed by Planck, Einstein and others, light was believed to be a transversal wave movement. This latter theory was developed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Still earlier, in the seventeenth century, the dominant view was that of Newtonian optics, according to which light was made up of material corpuscles.

The shift from one theoretical perspective to another is so pervasive and has such radical consequences for the discipline concerned that Kuhn does not hesitate to use the term 'scientific revolution'. What changes in a given discipline after one of these revolutions? It produces 'a shift in the problems available for scientific scrutiny and in the standards by which the profession determined what it should count as an admissible problem or as a legitimate problem-solution' (1962: 6). A reorientation in the discipline occurs that consists of 'a displacement of the conceptual network through which scientists view the world' (1962: 102). This 'conceptual network' is what Kuhn calls a 'paradigm',

and it is this aspect of his theorising, rather than his analysis of the developmental process in science, that interests us here.

Without a paradigm a science lacks orientations and criteria of choice: all problems, all methods, all techniques are equally legitimate. By contrast, the paradigm constitutes a guide: 'Paradigms' – recalls Kuhn – 'provide scientists not only with a map but also with some of the directions essential for map-making. In learning a paradigm the scientist acquires theory, methods, and standards together, usually in an inextricable mixture' (1962: 109).

Kuhn defines *normal science* as those phases in a scientific discipline during which a given paradigm, amply agreed to by the scientific community, predominates. During this phase, as long as the operating paradigm is not replaced by another in a 'revolutionary' manner, a scientific discipline does indeed develop in that linear and cumulative way that has been attributed to the whole of scientific development. 'No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sort of phenomena ... Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies' (Kuhn, 1962: 24).

Numerous examples of scientific paradigms are to be found in the history of the

BOX 1.1 PARADIGM

What does Thomas Kuhn mean by 'paradigm'? He means a theoretical perspective:

- accepted by the community of scientists of a given discipline
- founded on the previous acquisitions of that discipline
- that directs research through:
 - the specification and choice of what to study
 - the formulation of hypotheses to explain the phenomenon observed
 - the identification of the most suitable empirical research techniques.

natural sciences. Going back to our previous example, we can speak of corpuscular, wave, and quantum paradigms in optical physics. Likewise, as examples of alternative paradigms that have succeeded one another in time, we can quote Newtonian and Einsteinian mechanics, Ptolemaic and Copernican cosmology, and so on.

To what extent can we speak of paradigms in the social sciences? Kuhn notes that the paradigm is a characteristic feature of the 'mature' sciences. Before the corpuscular theory of light was introduced by Newton, no common paradigm existed among scientists in this sector; instead, various schools and sub-schools opposed and competed with one another, each with its own theory and point of view. Consequently, concludes Kuhn, 'The net result of their activity was something less than science' (1962: 13). In this perspective, because the social sciences lack a single paradigm broadly shared by the scientific community, they are in a pre-paradigmatic state, except perhaps for economics (according to Kuhn, 'economists agree on what economics is', while 'it remains an open question what parts of social science have yet acquired such paradigm at all' (1962: 14).

What has been said with regard to the social sciences also holds for sociology. Indeed, it is difficult to identify a paradigm that has been agreed upon, even for limited periods, by the community of sociologists. Nevertheless, there exists another interpretation of the thinking of Kuhn, which has been proposed in an attempt to apply his categories to sociology. This interpretation redefines the concept of the paradigm, maintaining all the elements of the original definition (theoretical perspective that defines the relevance of social phenomena, puts forward interpretative hypotheses and orients the techniques of empirical research) except one: that the paradigm is agreed upon by the members of the scientific community. This paves the way for the presence of multiple paradigms inside a given discipline; thus, instead of being a *pre-paradigmatic* discipline, sociology becomes a *multi-paradigmatic* one.

This is the interpretation of Friedrichs (1970) who, after highlighting the paradigm inspired by Parsons' structural-functionalism, sees in the Marxist dialectic approach the second paradigm of sociology, in which the concepts of system and consensus that are central to functionalism are replaced by that of conflict.

This interpretation of the concept of the paradigm in terms of an overall theoretical perspective which does not exclude other perspectives but rather is in open competition with them, is certainly the most widespread interpretation and corresponds to the current use of the term in the social sciences. Nevertheless, this less rigorous interpretation, which adapts Kuhn's original category to the status of the social sciences, must not be trivialized by equating a paradigm with a theory or a school of thought. Indeed, fundamental to the concept of the paradigm is its pre-theoretical and, in the final analysis, meta-physical character of a 'guiding vision', 'a view of the world', which shapes and organizes both theoretical reflection and empirical research and, as such, precedes both.

In this interpretation, the concept of the paradigm seems useful in analysing the various basic frames of reference that have been put forward, and which are still being evaluated in the field of social research methodology.

2. THREE BASIC QUESTIONS

Having defined and circumscribed the concept of a paradigm and briefly discussed its application to the social sciences, we will now abandon the slippery terrain of the paradigms of *sociological theory* (one paradigm? two paradigms? a hundred paradigms?) for more solid ground: the methodology of *social research*. We will not, however, go deeply into the complex epistemological problems of how many and which philosophical frameworks guide empirical research in the social sciences. Instead, we will confine ourselves to a historical

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review by briefly describing the fundamental perspectives that have been proposed and become accepted during the evolution of the discipline. Since this is a book on social research techniques, it seems natural and proper to begin by raising the question of *the founding paradigms of social research*, from which the first operative procedures emerged, and which subsequently guided the development of empirical research. Indeed, as has been said, one of the functions of a paradigm is to establish acceptable research methods and techniques in a discipline. As Hughes writes:

Every research tool or procedure is inextricably embedded in commitments to particular versions of the world and ways of knowing that world made by researchers using them. To use a questionnaire, an attitude scale of behavior, take the role of a participant observer, select a random sample ... is to be involved in conceptions of the world which allow these instruments to be used for the purposes conceived. No technique or method of investigation ... is self validating: its effectiveness, its very status as a research instrument ... is dependent, ultimately, on philosophical justification. (Hughes, 1980: 13)

Within the philosophical perspectives that generated and have accompanied the growth of social research, can we identify visions that are sufficiently general, cohesive and operative to be characterized as paradigms? It seems so. Indeed, there is broad agreement among scholars that two general frames of reference have *historically oriented* social research since its inception: the 'empiricist' vision and the 'humanist' vision. Various labels have been used, including 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism'; here, we will utilize the canonical term 'positivism' and the less consolidated 'interpretivism'. As we will soon see, these are two organic and strongly opposed visions of social reality and how it should be understood; and they have generated two coherent and highly differentiated blocks of research techniques. Before describing

these techniques, however, it is essential to explore their philosophical origins, since only by doing so can we achieve a full understanding of them.

In order to adequately compare the two above-mentioned paradigms, we will attempt to understand how they respond to the fundamental interrogatives facing social research (and scientific research in general). These can be traced back to three basic questions: Does (social) reality exist? Is it knowable? How can we acquire knowledge about it? In other words: *Essence, Knowledge and Method*.¹

*The ontological question*² This is the question of 'what'. It regards the nature and form of social reality. It asks if the world of social phenomena is a real and objective world endowed with an autonomous existence outside the human mind and independent from the interpretation given to it by the subject. It asks, therefore, if social phenomena are 'things in their own right' or 'representations of things'. The problem is linked to the more general philosophical question of the existence of things and of the external world. Indeed, the existence of an idea in the mind tells us nothing about the existence of the object in reality, just as a painting of a unicorn does not prove the existence of unicorns.

*The epistemological question*³ This is the question of the relationship between the 'who' and the 'what' (and the outcome of this relationship). It regards the knowability of social reality and, above all, focuses on the relationship between the observer and the reality observed. Clearly, the answer to this question depends on the answer to the previous ontological question. If the social world exists in its own right, independently from human action, the aspiration to reach it and understand it in a detached, objective way, without fear of altering it during the course of the cognitive process, will be legitimate. Closely connected with the answer given to the epistemological question are the forms knowledge can take: these range from deterministic 'natural laws' dominated by the

categories of cause and effect, to less cogent (probabilistic) laws, to various kinds of generalizations (e.g. Weberian ideal types), to the exclusion of generalizations (only specific and contingent knowledge being admissible).

*The methodological question*⁴ This is the question of 'how' (how can social reality be studied?). It therefore regards the technical instruments of the cognitive process. Here, too, the answers depend closely on the answers to the previous questions. A vision of social reality as an external object that is not influenced by the cognitive research procedures of the scientist will accept manipulative techniques (e.g. experimentation, the control of variables, etc.) more readily than a perspective that underlines the existence of interactive processes between the scholar and the object studied.

The three questions are therefore inter-related, not only because the answers to each are greatly influenced by the answers to the other two, but also because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish the boundaries between them (though, for the purpose of our exposition, we will try to do so). Indeed, it is difficult to separate conceptions of the nature of social reality from reflections on whether (and how) it may be understood and, in turn, to separate these from the techniques that can be used to understand it. Then again, these interrelations are implicit in the very definition of the scientific paradigm which, as we have seen, is both a theoretical perspective and a guide to research procedures.

3. POSITIVISM

Table 1.1 shows a synopsis of the different paradigms with regard to the fundamental questions introduced above. First of all, it will be noted that two versions of positivism are presented: the original nineteenth-century version, to which even the most tenacious empiricists no longer subscribe, and its twentieth-century reformulation, which was

constructed to address the manifest limits of the original version. The original positivist paradigm is presented both for historical reasons – since it was the vision that accompanied the birth of the social sciences and, in particular, the birth of sociology – and because the character of the other two paradigms can be better understood by examining the criticisms levelled against it.

Sociology was born under the auspices of positivist thought. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when the investigation of social phenomena was evolving into a subject of scientific study, the paradigm of the natural sciences reigned supreme. Inevitably, the new discipline took this paradigm as its model. Indeed, the founders of the discipline, Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer among them, shared a naïve faith in the methods of natural science. The positivist paradigm is no more than this: *the study of social reality utilizing the conceptual framework, the techniques of observation and measurement, the instruments of mathematical analysis, and the procedures of inference of the natural sciences.*

Let us look more closely at the distinctive elements of this definition. The conceptual framework: the categories of 'natural law', cause and effect, empirical verification, explanation, etc. The techniques of observation and measurement: the use of quantitative variables, even for qualitative phenomena; measurement procedures applied to ideological orientation, mental abilities and psychological states (attitude measurement, intelligence tests, etc.) Mathematical analysis: the use of statistics, mathematical models, etc. The procedures of inference: the inductive process, whereby hypotheses regarding the unknown are formed on the basis of what is known and specific observations give rise to general laws; the use of theory to predict outcomes; extrapolation from the sample to the whole population.

According to Comte, the prophet of nineteenth-century sociological positivism, the acquisition of the positivist viewpoint constituted, in all sciences, the end-point of a trend that had previously passed through theological and metaphysical stages. Such development

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Table 1.1 *Characteristics of the basic paradigms of social research*

	Positivism	Postpositivism	Interpretivism
<i>Ontology</i>	Naïve realism: social reality is 'real' and knowable (as if it were a 'thing')	Critical realism: social reality is 'real' but knowable only in an imperfect and probabilistic manner	Constructivism: the knowable world is that of meanings attributed by individuals. Relativism (multiple realities): these constructed realities vary in form and content among individuals, groups, and cultures
<i>Epistemology</i>	Dualism-objectivity True results Experimental science in search of laws Goal: explanation Generalizations: 'natural' immutable laws	Modified dualism-objectivity Results probabilistically true Experimental science in search of laws Multiplicity of theories for the same fact Goal: explanation Generalizations: provisional laws, open to revision	Non-dualism; non-objectivity. Researcher and object of study are not separate, but interdependent Interpretive science in search of meaning Goal: comprehension Generalizations: opportunity structures; ideal types
<i>Methodology</i>	Experimental-manipulative Observation Observer-observed detachment Mostly induction Quantitative techniques Analysis 'by variables'	Modified experimental-manipulative Observation Observer-observed detachment Mostly deduction (disproof of hypotheses) Quantitative techniques with some qualitative Analysis 'by variables'	Empathetic interaction between scholar and object studied Interpretation Observer-observed interaction Inuction (knowledge emerges from the reality studied) Qualitative techniques. Analysis 'by cases'

Source: Partially adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994: 109).

did not occur at the same time in all disciplines; it first took place in the inorganic sciences, such as astronomy, physics and chemistry, followed by the organic sciences, such as biology. It was therefore natural, in the progression from simple to complex material, that the positivist approach should be applied to the most complex material of all:

society. Thus, a new science would emerge: sociology, the positive science of society. According to this view, science is universal, and scientific method is unique. The social sciences do not differ from the natural sciences, and the positivist way of thinking that brought such great advances in the fields of astronomy, physics and biology is destined

to triumph even when its focus shifts from natural objects to social objects, such as religion, politics and work.

The first attempt to apply this overall theoretical perspective to empirical research was made by Durkheim. Indeed, as Durkheim pointed out:

Up to now sociology has dealt more or less exclusively not with things, but with concepts. It is true that Comte proclaimed that social phenomena are natural facts subject to natural laws. In so doing he implicitly recognized there are only things. Yet when, leaving behind these general philosophical statements, he tries to apply his principle and deduce from it the science it contained, it is ideas which he too takes as the object of study. (Durkheim, 1895: 63)

By contrast, Durkheim actually tried to translate the positivist principles of thought into empirical procedures; he was the first 'social scientist', the first true positivist sociologist. His empirical procedure is founded on the theory of 'social fact'. In his *Rules of Sociological Method*, he states at the outset that 'the first and most basic rule is to *consider social facts as things*' (1895: 60). For Durkheim, social facts are:

Ways of acting, thinking and feeling which possess the remarkable property of existing outside of the consciousness of the individual ... When I perform the duties as a ... husband or a citizen ... I carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfil obligations which are defined in by law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions. Even when they conform to my sentiments and when I feel their reality within me, that reality does not cease to be objective, for it is not I who have prescribed these duties; I have received them through education ... Similarly the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs and practices of his religious life; if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside him ... (Likewise, for as far as) the system of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts ... the practices I follow

in my profession, etc., all function independently from the use I make of them. (Durkheim, 1895: 50–51)

These social facts, even if they are not material entities, nonetheless have the same properties as the 'things' of the natural world, and from this derive two consequences. On the one hand, social facts are not subject to human will; they are things that offer resistance to human intervention; they condition and limit it. On the other hand, just like the phenomena of the natural world, they function according to their own rules. They possess a deterministic structure that can be discovered through scientific research. Thus, notwithstanding their different objects, the natural world and the social world share a substantial *methodological unity* (they can both be studied through the same investigative logic and the same method, hence the name 'social physics' attributed to the study of society).

The first assertion is, therefore, that social reality exists outside the individual. The second is that this social reality is objectively understandable, and the third that it can be studied by means of the same methods as the natural sciences. As Durkheim states, 'Our rule implies no metaphysical conception, no speculation about the innermost depth of being. What it demands is that the sociologist should assume the state of mind of physicists, chemists or in physiologists, when they venture into an as yet unexplored area of their scientific field' (1895: 37). And again: 'Our main objective is to extend the scope of scientific rationalism to cover human behaviour ... What has been termed our positivism is merely a consequence of this rationalism.' (Durkheim, 1895: 33)

Let us now look at how this understanding is acquired. Positivism is fundamentally inductive, where *induction* means 'moving from the particular to the general'⁵ the process by which generalizations or universal laws are derived from empirical observation, from the identification of regularities and recurrences in the fraction of reality that is empirically studied. Implicit in inductive procedures is

**BOX 1.2 ANSWERS GIVEN BY
POSITIVISM TO THE THREE BASIC QUESTIONS**

Ontology: naïve realism This position stems from everything that has been said regarding the ‘codification’ of social reality, and can be succinctly expressed by two propositions: (a) there exists an objective social reality that is external to human beings, whether they are studying or performing social acts; (b) this reality is knowable in its true essence.⁶

Epistemology: dualist and objectivist; natural law The assertion that knowledge is attainable is based on two assumptions: (a) that the scholar and the object studied are independent entities (dualism); (b) that the scholar can study the object without influencing it or being influenced by it (objectivity). Investigation is carried out as if through a ‘one-way mirror’. Knowledge assumes the form of ‘laws’ based on the categories of cause and effect. These laws are part of an external reality that is independent of the observer (‘natural laws’); the scientist’s task is to ‘discover them’. There is no fear that the researcher’s values might distort her reading of social reality, or vice versa. This position, which excludes values in favour of facts, necessarily derives from the vision of social fact as *given* and unmodifiable.

Methodology: experimental and manipulative The methods and techniques of positivist research – like its basic conception – draw heavily on the classical empiricist approach to the natural sciences. Two features of the experimental method are taken up: (a) its use of inductive procedures, whereby general formulations are derived from particular observations; and (b) its mathematical formulation which, though not always attainable, is the final goal of the positivist scientist. The ideal technique remains – even though its applicability to social reality is limited – that of experiment, founded on manipulation and control of the variables involved and the detachment of the observer from what is observed.

the assumption of order and uniformity in nature, that universal organizing principles exist. The task of the scientist is, of course, to discover these. This vision has long dominated the natural sciences and has even been identified with the scientific method. In assuming that social life, like all other phenomena, is subject to immutable natural laws, the positivist conception of society fully

adopts this vision. According to Durkheim, the social scientist is an explorer ‘Conscious that he is penetrating into the unknown. He must feel himself in the presence of facts governed by laws as unsuspected as those of life before the science of biology was evolved. He must hold himself ready to make discoveries which will surprise and disconcert him.’ (1895: 37)

Finally, with regard to the 'form' of this knowledge, there is no doubt that these laws of nature will eventually be identified, formulated, demonstrated and 'proved'; in their most complete form, they are laws that link cause and effect:

Since the law of causality has been verified in the other domains of nature and has progressively extended its authority from the physical and chemical world to the biological world, and from the latter to the psychological world, one may justifiably grant that it is likewise true for the social world. Today it is possible to add that the research undertaken on the basis of this postulate tends to confirm this. (Durkheim, 1895: 159).

In the positivist paradigm, the elements that we have called 'naïve faith' in the methods of the natural sciences are all too evident. Underlying the various manifestations of positivism there is always, in fact, a sort of enthusiasm for 'positive' scientific knowledge, whereby the 'scientific method' is viewed as the only valid means of achieving true knowledge in all fields of human endeavour.

4. NEOPOSITIVISM AND POSTPOSITIVISM

Throughout the twentieth century, the positivist approach was continually revised and adjusted in attempts to overcome its intrinsic limits. The reassuring clarity and linearity of nineteenth-century positivism gave way to a twentieth-century version that was much more complex and detailed and, in some respects, contradictory and unclear. However, some basic assumptions were maintained, such as ontological realism ('the world exists independently of our awareness of it') and the pre-eminent role of empirical observation in understanding this world. We will not enter into the details of this development, or the various phases of its history; rather, we will mention only 'neopositivism', the term used

to denote the approach that dominated in the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, and 'postpositivism', which is used to identify its further evolution from the end of the 1960s onwards.⁷ We will therefore outline the principal shifts in perspective that occurred – over time and with differing degrees of intensity – with respect to the positivist orthodoxy presented in the previous section.

One of the first revisions of nineteenth-century positivism was made by the school known as *logical positivism*, which gave rise to neopositivism. The movement formed around the discussions of a group of scholars of different disciplinary origins who, in the second half of the 1920s, constituted the so-called 'Vienna Circle'. Among its principal exponents were the philosophers Schlick and Carnap, the mathematician Hahn, the economist Neurath, and the physicist Frank. A few years later, a group of like-minded thinkers (Reichenbach, Herzberg, Lewin, Hempel and others) was formed in Berlin. In the wake of Nazi persecution, some notable representatives of this school emigrated to the United States, where the affinity between their views and American pragmatism contributed considerably to the spread of neopositivist thought. This influenced other disciplines, including sociology, which had been developing a very rich tradition of empirical research in the United States throughout the 1930s.

The new point of view assigned a central role to the criticism of science and redefined the task of philosophy, which was to abandon its broad theorization in order to undertake critical analysis of the theories elaborated within single disciplines (Schlick hoped to see a time when there would be no more books on philosophy, but all books would be written in a 'philosophical way'). This led to the rejection of the 'great questions' and of all metaphysical issues that could not be demonstrated ('pseudo-problems'), and which were therefore branded as meaningless. Instead, the utmost attention was devoted to methodological problems in every science, to the logical analysis of their language and their

theoretical output, to the criticism of their assumptions, and – not least – to the procedures by which conceptual elaboration could be empirically verified.

From what has been said, it is evident that epistemological questions are central to this movement of thought, and the influence it had on the methodology of the sciences, including the social sciences, is comprehensible. It must be remembered that one of the postulates of neopositivism is the widespread conviction that the meaning of a statement derives from its empirical verifiability. The formula ‘the meaning of a proposition is the method of its verification’ neatly summarizes this point of view.

What did this conception of science and scientific knowledge mean for social research? What were the repercussions on operational procedures and research techniques? The main consequence was the development of a completely new way of speaking about social reality, using a language borrowed from mathematics and statistics. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, the principal exponent of neopositivist empirical methodology in sociology, called this the *language of variables*. Every social object, beginning with the individual, was analytically defined on the basis of a range of attributes and properties (‘variables’), and was reduced to these; and social phenomena were analysed in terms of relationships among variables. The variable, with its neutral character and objectivity, thus became the protagonist of social analysis; there was no longer any need to recompose the original object or individual as a whole again. In this way social research became ‘depersonalized’, and the language of variables, with the measurement of concepts, the distinction between dependent and independent variables, the quantification of their interrelations and the formulation of causal models, provided a formal instrument that allowed social scientists to go beyond ‘the notoriously vague everyday language (in a process of) clarification and purification of discourse (that is)

very important for the social scientist; ... we must sort out this knowledge and organize it in some manageable form; we must reformulate common sense statements so that they can be subjected to empirical test’ (Lazarsfeld and Rosenberg, 1955: 2,11). In this way, all social phenomena could be surveyed, measured, correlated, elaborated and formalized and the theories either confirmed or disproved in an objective manner without ambiguity.

But nothing would ever be the same again. The twentieth-century conception of science was by now far removed from the solid certainties of nineteenth-century positivism, in which a ‘mechanical’ conception of reality dominated, together with a reassuring belief in immutable laws and faith in the irresistible progress of science. This new philosophic-scientific atmosphere arose first of all out of developments in the natural sciences and, in particular, in physics, during the early years of the new century. Quantum mechanics, Einstein’s special and general theories of relativity, Heisenberg’s principle of uncertainty – to cite only a few of the cornerstones of the new physics – introduced elements of probability and uncertainty to crucial areas such as the concept of causal law, the objectivity of the external world, and even the classical categories of space and time.

Theories were no longer expressed in terms of deterministic laws, but of probability. The crucial moment in this change was the shift from classical physics (Newtonian approach) to quantum physics. According to quantum mechanics, there are processes in elementary physics – so-called quantum jumps – that are not analyzable in terms of traditional causal mechanisms, but are absolutely unpredictable single facts governed by probabilistic laws. Scientific theories would no longer explain social phenomena through models characterized by logical necessity, and deterministic laws were replaced by probabilistic laws that implied the existence of haphazard elements and the presence of disturbances and

fluctuations. If this notion of probabilistic indeterminism was valid for the natural world, then it would be even more valid for the social world, the world of language, thought, and human interaction.

An element introduced into scientific methodology by this evolution of positivism is the concept of falsification, which was taken up as a criterion for the empirical validation of a theory or a theoretical hypothesis. This states that a theory cannot be positively confirmed by data, and that empirical validation can take place only in the negative, through the 'non-confutation' of the theory by the data – that is to say, by demonstrating that the data do not contradict the hypothesis and, therefore, that the theory and the data are merely compatible. Positive proof is impossible, since the same data could be compatible with other theoretical hypotheses.

This position gives rise to a sense of the provisional nature of any theoretical statement, since it is *never definitively proven* and always exposed to the axe of possible disproof. As Popper writes, the idol of certainty crumbles: 'The old scientific ideal of *episteme* – of absolutely certain, demonstrable knowledge – has proved to be an idol. The demand for scientific objectivity makes it inevitable that every scientific statement must remain *tentative for ever*' (1934, English translation 1992: 280). Man cannot know but only conjecture. This point is also illustrated by a statement attributed to Einstein: 'to the degree that our propositions are certain, they say nothing about reality; to the degree that they say something, they are uncertain'.

Lastly, and this brings us to the most recent development of the postpositivist approach, it has become a widespread conviction that empirical observation, the very perception of reality, is not an objective picture, but is *theory-laden*,⁸ in the sense that even the simple recording of reality depends on the researcher's frame of mind, and on social and cultural conditioning. In other words, despite the assumption that reality exists independently

from the cognitive and perceptive activity of humans, the act of understanding remains conditioned by the social circumstances and the theoretical framework in which it takes place. The thesis of the theory-laden nature of empirical observations – that is to say, the claim that no clear distinction exists between theoretical concepts and observed data – brings down the last positivist certainty: that of the objectivity of the data collected and of the neutrality and inter-subjectivity of the language of observation.

It must be said, nonetheless, that this process of moving away from the original positivist orthodoxy, first through neopositivism and then postpositivism, did not mean that the empiricist spirit was abandoned. Modern positivism, when it states that laws (both natural and social) are probabilistic and open to revision, when it affirms the conjectural nature of scientific knowledge and in the end, the theoretical conditioning of the observation itself, has come a long way from the naïve interpretation of the deterministic laws of the original positivism. It has lost its certainties, but does not repudiate its empiricist foundations. The new positivism redefines the initial presuppositions and the objectives of social research; but the empirical approach, though much amended and reinterpreted, still utilizes the original observational language, which was founded on the cornerstones of operationalization, quantification and generalization. And, since we are dealing with research techniques, it is this point that interests us here. The operational procedures, the ways of collecting data, the measurement operations and the statistical analyses have not fundamentally changed. Conclusions are more cautious, but the (quantitative) techniques utilized in reaching them are still the same.

At this point, we will conclude our brief excursus on the developments of the positivist paradigm by filling out the column in Table 1.1 regarding the positions of modern postpositivism on the three fundamental questions.

BOX 1.3 ANSWERS GIVEN BY NEO- AND POST-POSITIVISM TO THE THREE BASIC QUESTIONS

Ontology: critical realism As in the case of positivism, the existence of a reality external to human beings is assumed; but – contrary to what is upheld in the positivist paradigm – this reality is only imperfectly knowable, both because of the inevitable imperfection of human knowledge and because of the very nature of its laws, which are probabilistic. This point of view has also been called ‘critical realism’: realism, in that it assumes that cause-effect relationships exist in reality outside the human mind; critical, in that it underlines the view that the scientist must always be prepared to question every scientific acquisition.

Epistemology: modified dualism-objectivity; middle range, probabilistic and conjectural laws With regard to the question of the relationship between the scholar and the object studied, dualism, in the sense of separation and non-interference between the two realities, is no longer sustained. It is recognized that the subject conducting the study may exert a disturbing effect on the object of study, and that a reaction effect may ensue. The objectivity of knowledge remains the ideal goal and the reference criterion, but this can only be achieved approximately. In the cognitive process, deductive procedures are emphasized, through the mechanism of falsifying hypotheses. The intent remains that of formulating generalizations in the form of laws, even if limited in scope, probabilistic and provisional.

Methodology: modified experimental-manipulative The operational phases of research remain fundamentally inspired by a substantial detachment between the researcher and the object studied (experiments, manipulation of variables, quantitative interviews, statistical analysis, etc.). Nevertheless, qualitative methods are admitted. The scientific community is important as it critically analyses new hypotheses, and can confirm results by means of new experiments (repeated results are more likely to be true).

5. INTERPRETIVISM

5.1 Beginnings

Two versions of the positivist paradigm have been presented: the initial nineteenth-century perspective and its critical revision, carried out in the 1930s and again in the 1970s. The paradigm presented in this section underwent

an almost symmetrical development. If we wished to stress the analogy between the two paradigms, we would introduce the initial vision of ‘interpretive sociology’, which owed both its methodological elaboration and its first attempts at empirical research, at the beginning of the twentieth century, to Max Weber (his role was symmetrical to that played by Durkheim in positivism). This

would then be followed by the 1960s reinterpretation of the original approach, above all in American sociology. This, in turn, gave rise to the various lines of thought found in symbolic interactionism, phenomenological sociology and ethnomethodology, which, in spite of their differences, are unified by a common emphasis on individual interaction.

However, we prefer not to proceed in this manner, since there is no discontinuity between the original Weberian vision and subsequent developments, as there was in the shift from nineteenth to twentieth-century positivism. Instead, we will put these two historical blocks of approaches to social research together under the same heading and utilize the general term 'interpretivism' for all the theoretical visions in which reality is not simply to be observed, but rather 'interpreted'.

How did this new vision of social science arise? While positivism originated in nineteenth-century French and English cultures (we need mention only Auguste Comte, John Stuart Mill and Herbert Spencer) and owed its sociological development chiefly to the French culture (we are, of course, referring to Durkheim), its most radical and organic criticism emerged in the context of German historicism.

In general, the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey is credited with the first critical attack on Comtean scientism in the name of the autonomy of the human sciences – in the sense that they are non-homologous to the natural sciences. In his *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (1883), Dilthey draws a famous distinction between 'sciences of nature' and 'sciences of the spirit', basing the difference between them precisely on the relationship that is established between the researcher and the reality studied. Indeed, in the natural sciences the object studied consists of a reality that is external to the researcher and remains so during the course of the study; thus, knowledge takes the form of *explanation* (cause-effect laws, etc.). In the human sciences, by contrast, since there is no such detachment between the observer and what is observed, knowledge can be obtained

only through a totally different process, that of *comprehension* (*Verstehen*). According to Dilthey, we *explain* nature, whereas we *understand* the life of the mind.

5.2 Max Weber: objectivity and orientation towards individuality

But it is only with Max Weber that this new perspective enters fully into the field of sociology. Indeed, Dilthey had spoken generically of 'sciences of the spirit', among which he singled out historiography. Weber brought the concept of *Verstehen* into sociology, and revised Dilthey's original position. While adopting the principle of *Verstehen*, Weber did not want to fall into subjectivist individualism or psychologism; he wanted to preserve the objectivity of social science both in terms of its being independent of value judgements, and in terms of the possibility of formulating statements of a general nature, even when an 'orientation towards individuality' is adopted.

Regarding the first point, throughout his life Weber reiterated the need for the historical and social sciences to be free from any value judgement whatsoever. However, his awareness of the problem (sharpened by his intense involvement in politics and, later, by the ethical questions arising from the imminent threat of world war) exceeded his ability to provide an unequivocal answer. Nonetheless, he never abandoned his conviction that the historical and social sciences must be *value-free*. 'The distinction between knowledge and judgement – that is to say, between fulfilling the scientific responsibility of seeing factual reality and the fulfilling the practical responsibility of defending one's own ideals – this is the principle to which we must adhere most firmly' (Weber, 1904).

While value judgements must be kept out of the historical and social sciences, values will, according to Weber, inevitably influence the choice of the objects of study, thus taking on a guiding role for the researcher. Even if they play no role in forming judgements, values are still involved in what could be called a 'selective function'; they serve to decide upon a field of research in which the study

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proceeds in an objective manner in order to reach causal explanations of phenomena.

Freedom from values was therefore the first condition for objectivity in the social sciences. The terms of the second condition, understood as the ability to produce statements which would be to some extent *general*, remained to be defined. According to Weber, the social sciences are to be distinguished from the natural sciences not on the basis of their object (as in Dilthey's contraposition of human sciences with the sciences of the spirit), nor because their goal is to study social phenomena in their individuality, since the social sciences also aim at formulating generalizations; rather, the distinction lies in their 'orientation towards individuality'.

This orientation is primarily one of method. For Weber the method is that of '*Verstehen*'. However, in defining what he means by this, Weber rejects any form of psychologism. *Verstehen* is neither psychological perspicacity nor sudden illumination; it is the rational comprehension of the motivations underlying behaviour. It is not intuition, but 'interpretation': understanding the purpose of the action and grasping the intentional element in human behaviour. The ability to identify with others, which is inherent in *Verstehen*, is also channelled towards rational interpretation: putting oneself into the other person's position so as to 'understand'. This involves understanding the motivations of actions, the subjective meaning that individuals attribute to their own behaviour: because every action, even the most apparently illogical, has its own inner rationality, its own interior 'sense'. As Boudon writes:

For Weber, to understand an individual action is to acquire sufficient means of obtaining information to understand the motives behind it. In his view, observers *understand* the action of an observed subject as soon as they can conclude that in the same situation it is quite probable that they too would act in the same way. ... As can be seen, *understanding* in the Weberian sense implies the ability of the observer to *put him or herself in the actor's place*, but does not in any way imply that actor's

subjectivity is immediately transparent. ... Indeed, the Weberian notion of *comprehension* designates a procedure which is very close to what textbooks of logic call 'ampliative induction' and which consists of reconstructing motives not directly accessible by cross-checking facts. (Boudon, 1984: 31, 51)

How can this orientation towards individuality yield objectivity? If we start with the individual and the subjective sense of his action, how can we attain objective knowledge that has general characteristics? Here we are faced with the second condition for objectivity in the historical and social sciences.

The answer is provided by the Weberian concept of the *ideal type*. For Weber, ideal types are forms of social action that are seen to recur in human behaviour, the typical uniformity of behaviour constituted through an abstractive process which, after isolating some elements within the multiplicity of empirical fact, proceeds to coordinate them into a coherent picture that is free from contradiction. The ideal type, then, is *an abstraction that comes from empirically observed regularities*.

The Weberian ideal type impinges upon all fields of social science and can be found at different levels of generality, ranging from the single individual to society as a whole. Weber exemplified ideal types with reference to social structures (for example capitalism), institutions (e.g. bureaucracy, church and sect, forms of power) and individual behaviour (e.g. rational behaviour).

These 'ideal types', writes Weber, are not to be 'confused with reality ... they were constructed in an ideal heuristic manner' (Weber, 1922a); they are 'ideal' in that they are mental constructs; they carry out a 'heuristic' function in that they direct knowledge. They are empty shells, 'fictions lacking life' as Schutz has described them; they have no concrete counterpart in reality, but are theoretical models that help the researcher to interpret reality. For example, probably none of the three ideal types of power Weber distinguishes – charismatic power, traditional power, and rational-legal power – has ever

existed in its pure form. The ideal type is a clear, coherent, rational, unambiguous construct. Reality, however, is much more complex, contradictory and disorderly. No form of charismatic power that has ever existed has been wholly and exclusively charismatic; though globally identifiable with this Weberian 'type', the actual form will doubtless contain elements of the other two forms of power.

The regularities that the researcher pursues and identifies in order to interpret social reality are not 'laws' in the positivist sense. For Weber, 'the number and type of causes that have determined any individual event whatever, are in fact, always *infinite* ... and the causal question, when treating the *individuality* of a phenomenon is not a question of laws but rather a question of concrete causal *connections* ... the possibility of a selection within the infinity of determining elements' (Weber 1922b). Instead of laws, then, we have causal connections, or rather, to use Boudon's expressions, *mere possibilities or opportunity structures* ('If A, then most frequently B', Boudon, 1984: 75). It is therefore impossible to establish the factors that determine a certain social event or individual behaviour, but one can trace the conditions that make it possible.

Thus, in contraposition to the causal laws of the positivist approach, which are *general and deterministic* (though less so in the more probabilistic neopositivist interpretation), we have statements and connections characterized by *specificity and probability*.

5.3 Further developments

Weber has been discussed at some length because the work of the great German sociologist anticipated practically all the themes that would be subsequently developed in the rich vein of sociological theory and research that gave rise to approaches such as phenomenological sociology (Husserl and Schutz), symbolic interactionism (Mead and Blumer) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel and Cicourel), which became established in American sociology from the 1960s onwards. All these perspectives share fundamental characteristics

of the Weberian approach: a strong anti-deterministic conviction; opposition to all philosophies of history and all forms of evolutionism; the fundamental 'ontological' difference between natural sciences and social sciences, and the irreducibility of the latter to the former's methods of research; and the criticism of any attempt to explain human action by starting from social systems and the conditioning factors within them. Finally, all of these approaches share – this time in positive terms – a strong conviction that 'individual action endowed with meaning' must be seen as the core of every social phenomenon and of the sociologist's work.

Weber, however, did not push his methodological approach to extreme consequences. While he elaborated these concepts in his methodological writings, in his theoretical reflections and empirical research he constantly operated on a macrosociological level, adopting the perspective of comparative history, in an effort to understand macrostructural phenomena such as the economy, the state, power, religion, and the bureaucracy. By contrast, the movement that arose in the United States in the 1960s developed the Weberian perspective in its natural direction, that is, in a 'micro' perspective. If society is built on the interpretations of individuals, and if it is their interaction that creates structures, then it is the interaction of individuals that one must study in order to understand society. This conviction opened up a completely new area of sociological research, the study of everyday life, which had formerly been disregarded as non-scientific.

It is clear that the interpretivist paradigm differs radically from the positivist frame of reference. The 'subjectivist' view is first of all a reaction to the 'objectivist' positivist position. By treating social reality and human action as something that could be studied objectively, the positivist approach overlooked the individual dimension: all those aspects that distinguish the world of human beings from the world of things. The very elements that disturbed the 'scientific'

**BOX 1.4 ANSWERS GIVEN BY INTERPRETIVISM
TO THE THREE BASIC QUESTIONS**

Ontology: constructivism and relativism (multiple realities) 'Constructivism': the knowable world is that of the meanings attributed by individuals. The radical constructivist position virtually excludes the existence of an objective world (each individual produces his own reality). The moderate position does not ask whether a reality external to individual constructions exists, since it claims that only the latter can be known. 'Relativism': these meanings, or mental constructions, vary among individuals; and even when they are not strictly individual in that they are shared by the individuals within a group, they vary among cultures. A universal social reality valid for all persons, an absolute reality, does not exist; rather, there are multiple realities in that there are multiple and different perspectives from which people perceive and interpret social facts.

Epistemology: non-dualism and non-objectivity; ideal types, possibilities, opportunity structures The separation between the researcher and the object of study tends to disappear, just like that between ontology and epistemology. In contrast to the positivist vision, social research is defined as 'not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning' (Geertz, 1973: 5), in which the central categories are those of value, meaning and purpose. In pursuing its objective, which is to understand individual behaviour, social science can utilize abstractions and generalizations: ideal types and possibilities or opportunity structures.

Methodology: empathetic interaction between the researcher and the object of study The interaction between the researcher and the object of study during the empirical phase of research is no longer judged negatively but constitutes, instead, the basis of the cognitive process. If the aim is to understand the meanings that subjects attribute to their own actions, the research techniques cannot be anything but qualitative and subjective, meaning that they will vary from case to case depending on the form taken by the interaction between the researcher and the object studied. Knowledge is obtained through a process of induction; it is 'discovered in reality' by the researcher who approaches it without prejudices or preconceived theories.

research of the positivist approach and were therefore excluded – individual, motivations and intentions, values, free will, in short, the subjective dimension that cannot be perceived by quantitative tools – become the

primary object of interpretive research. It is on this fundamental difference between the objects studied that the interpretive point of view bases its alleged superiority over the positivist approach. The convinced supporter

of the interpretive paradigm affirms not only the autonomy and diversity of the historical and social sciences from the natural sciences, but also their superiority, since only an approach that adopts the principle of *Verstehen* can achieve that understanding from the inside which is the basis of the knowledge of behaviour and of the social world.

These fundamental differences inevitably imply different techniques and research procedures. And it is this aspect that most interests us here. Indeed, if the essence of human life differs from that of the natural world, then it should be studied by means of different methods from those of the positivist approach. The subjectivist position cannot adopt 'the language of variables'. It cannot adopt it in the phase of empirical observation on account of the centrality of intentional and subjective components which, by definition, escape objective quantification and can be seized only through empathy. It cannot adopt it during the phase of data analysis because it cannot imagine analysing human behaviour in terms of the interaction of separate components (variables), as the human being is a whole that cannot be reduced to the sum of its parts. The subjectivist position has therefore developed its own research procedures, its own observation techniques and its own ways of analysing empirical reality, which form the body of so-called 'qualitative research'. This will be discussed in greater detail later. For now, we will conclude our presentation of the interpretive paradigm by summarizing this approach according to the scheme shown in Table 1.1.

6. A FINAL NOTE: RADICALIZATION, CRITICISM AND NEW TENDENCIES

In the previous sections we have described – with reference to their fundamental concepts and their founding fathers – the two paradigms

which have guided social research and shaped its strategies and techniques since its inception. We will now mention the criticisms levelled at these two approaches and a few instances of their radicalization.

For what concerns the positivist paradigm, we have seen that great attention was focused, especially in the period of neopositivism, on formulating and developing empirical procedures. The radicalization of this trend gave rise to a sort of anti-speculative empiricism in which 'the method', and subsequently 'the data', reigned supreme; the task of the social scientist was no longer to formulate theories and then to test them empirically, but to collect and describe data under the naïve illusion that 'the data speak for themselves'.

This was a process of progressive reduction (hence the accusation of 'reductionism') that went through various phases. First, the boundaries of theoretical exploration were shrunk; questions of verification, or confirmation of hypotheses (*ars probandi*), were stressed at the expense of discovery (*ars inveniendi*). Subsequently, attention was shifted from the content to the method. This emphasis on empirical validation meant that questions which could not be translated immediately and simply into empirically verifiable procedures were excluded from theoretical considerations. Theoretical complexity was therefore gradually reduced to banality. Finally, attention was shifted from the method to the data, from the operationalization of concepts to the practical problems of collection and analysis of data (perhaps even statistically sophisticated) – data which by now were bereft of theoretical and methodological background. As Luciano Gallino points out, 'The immediate results of the research were what the critics of sociological neopositivism might have expected: a huge mass of data, meticulously recorded, measured and classified, but uncoordinated, lacking significant connections, and unable to yield adequate knowledge of the object to which they nominally refer' (Gallino, 1978: 457).