

Question: “Within the social sciences there is a debate about whether Sociology is a science or not”. Evaluate the major positions in this debate.

Science may be defined as a set of key components which can be related to a methodological process. It may also be defined broadly as the accumulation of verifiable knowledge or narrowly as the testing of hypotheses by positivistic methodology. Science is made up of four components which are empirical, theoretical, cumulative and objective. The empirical aspect deals with measurable phenomena, the theoretical aspect seeks to uncover casual relationships between phenomena, the cumulative aspect builds up knowledge, moving towards greater understanding of the world and the objective aspect concerns itself with the objective discovery of the truth. Personal attitudes and bias have no place in science.

Sociology may be defined as the study of society and the way in which society influences people’s behaviour, beliefs and identity. It is the study of human social life by any means that are effective. In sociology, statistics are collected and analysed and human behaviour is observed.

Many of the initiators of sociology are convinced that it is conceivable to create a science of society based on the same principles and methods as the natural scientists. This attempt to apply natural science approaches to sociology is called positivism. Positivists, such as Auguste Comte and Karl Popper believe that the same techniques and processes used by scientists can be applied to social sciences. They believe that social facts and the behaviour of humans like the behaviour of matter can be objectively observed, expressed as a quantity and measured. These measurements are vital to explain human behaviour. Positivists also believe that based on objective measurements, observations of behaviour will allow statements of effect and cause to

be made. Then theories may be formulated to explain observed behaviour. Positivists criticize those sociologists who study unobservable and subjective mental states.

One positivist, Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who is one of the founding fathers of sociology believed that the development of society followed 'invariable laws'. He also believed that "the scientific study of society should be confined to collecting information about phenomena that can be objectively observed and classified." (Haralambos and Holborn, Sociology Themes and Perspectives, 2000) Comte believed that there was a ranking of scientific subjects, with sociology at the top. He also believes that scientific knowledge of society could be gathered together and used to enhance human life.

Another positivist Karl Popper also believed that sociology was scientific. He believed that social sciences and sociology could be scientific by following a set of methodological practices.

There are also a number of persons who believe that sociology is not a science. These are the physical scientists and the subjectivists' sociologists. The physical scientists base their beliefs on empirical and theoretical grounds. On empirical grounds, they believe that sociologists have not developed sufficient sophisticated and compelling ways of measuring phenomena as the physical scientists have done.

From the theoretical perspective, they believe that the heart of theory is prediction but people unlike objects are unpredictable. They believe that people have free will unlike objects and that useful theory and true prediction in sociology are impossible.

The subjectivists' sociologists declare that sociology is not and should not claim to be a science based on three grounds which are empirical, theoretical and

cumulative. Empirically, they believe that it is not possible to gather facts the same way that physical scientists do since social facts like statistics are really social constructs and do not reflect an objective reality. They believe that an objective reality does not exist in sociology and that sociologists deal more with subjective perceptions of reality.

Theoretically, they also believe that sociological theories are based on assumptions concerning the nature of reality that are themselves really based on theories or ideologies.

Cumulatively, they believe that society is dynamic and therefore sociology is dynamic. Society is always changing and therefore sociological theories of one hundred years ago may not apply in the same way today. New research would have to be considered, in order for theories to be more accurate and applicable today.

Phenomenologists also believe that sociology is not a science. They reject the view that natural science methodology is appropriate to sociology. To phenomenologists, objective observation of the social world is not possible. They believe that it is not possible to collect meaningful statistical data and establish correlations, casual connections and laws.

In conclusion the positivists believe that sociology is a science. Marx also believed that his sociology was objective and scientific. They believe that sociologists can use the same procedures and methods as natural scientists do to come up with theories behind human behaviour.

The physical scientists and subjectivists' sociologists believe that sociology is not a science. They believe that it is not possible to measure the social world objectively and that it is not possible to find laws of human behaviour.

The debate about whether sociology is a science has been existent for quite some time and will continue to exist.

Bibliography

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